

The story of Mary and Martha from the gospel of Luke may seem like a strange passage to be studying on the first day of the New Year. Yet, this is the scripture that I felt led to focus on today, primarily because God has been highlighting some of the truths from this passage in my own life and I want to be transparent in my journey. A few months ago when I was teaching a Sunday School class on the story of Martha and Mary, I thought it would be fun to have the kids act the story out. I have read this bible story many times but watching the bible story being acted out - caught my attention in a new way and I felt a nudge from God to pay attention to what I was seeing. I think Jordan was playing Martha and of course she did it well. I can't remember who was playing Mary. As the kids acted the story out and Mary sat at Jesus' feet and Martha scurried about, I think I thought that Mary would look like the odd one out in the story just sitting at Jesus' feet but instead it was Martha that stood out to me like a sore thumb. I was surprised at my reaction and watching it I almost felt annoyed by Martha. This threw me because I have always related to Martha more than Mary when reading this story. I had concluded that Martha gets a bad rap when she is the one serving everyone and Mary in my opinion was being a tad selfish and maybe even a bit lazy just sitting at Jesus feet. I know Jesus endorsed Mary's choice, but it never sat well with me. Yet as I watched this play unfold I realized God in His gentle way was showing me that Martha was choosing the wrong thing to focus on.

Please, don't misunderstand me, I truly believe that Mary and Martha were both devout followers of Jesus. In John 11: 5 we read that "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and their brother Lazarus." Yes, Mary and Martha are close friends with Jesus and I think Martha's desire was to actively serve Jesus with her whole heart. Yet, as the passage in Luke describes, the demands of the day start to make Martha anxious and she becomes uptight/distracted. (Can we relate...I know I can?) Martha then asks "Lord don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

The Lord answers "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed or indeed only one. Mary has chosen the best, and it will not be taken away." Ouch... this is hard to hear but the reality is when the being and doing are pitted against each other Jesus synopsis is the being is more important than the doing. Does this mean doing is wrong- no not at all, but as I look more at this portion of scripture I am reminded that being with God needs to be the baseline that all things doing flow from. The concern I have is many of us have lost the practice of just being with Jesus. We are so caught up in doing all things Christian plus all things life that sometimes we spend very little time just being with Jesus.

Not long after visiting Mary and Martha, Jesus uses a vine as a teaching metaphor about the importance of being. Pastor Gary read this portion of scripture this morning in John 15. As Jesus walks through the grapevines of the

Kidron Valley, he emphatically endorses a choice like Mary's. Jesus instructs his disciples how to live. The key, he says, is abiding in Him. For apart from Jesus, they can do nothing. In order for them to bear any fruit in their lives they first must abide in Jesus.

As a person I have been surprised how much I jump on the hamster wheel of doing for God before being with God. The interesting thing that happens for me when I choose to operate in this way is that when I try to slow down and just to be with God it is actually difficult for me to do, even in a quiet room with no distractions my mind sometimes can not slow down enough to focus on just being with God. I would suggest the same may be true for Martha- that if she would have taken time to sit at Jesus feet, she would have still been distracted. I think that's why God highlighted Martha to me when I watched the children act out the play. I realized I was getting out of balance. Matthew 7 speaks of those who say to God in the last days. "But Lord did I not do mighty works in your name." God responds " But I never knew you."

As I have started to make changes in my own life to re-establish time to just be with God, with no agenda I am experiencing a difference.

Again I see the importance that if doing for God is not first nourished by authentic communion with God, I easily become out of balance and am at risk of not knowing God and in-turn can move out of His will.

Let's break this down again- is doing or serving God wrong -no- not at all. It is a vital part of us being followers of Christ. John 15: 5 reminds us that the reason we remain in Christ is so we can bear much fruit. The problem happens when all the doing takes the center stage and we are operating in works and actions hoping this will translate into our interior life.

My concern again pointing the finger my way first is that many of us are chronically over extended and doing more for Jesus than our inner life can sustain. We say yes to things quickly with very little time to discern God's will and I think many of us struggle to know how to discern God's will. The norm is to be overloaded and if we are honest with ourselves our genuine time with simply being with God is often lacking and we are drawing from a shallow depth of spiritual communion with God.

Why should we make an effort to be with God?

Because, there is nothing that will enrich our lives more than a deeper and clearer perception of God's presence in the routine of our daily living.

Nothing...no income, no right relationship, no career, no material possession, no self help technique- nothing

In the humdrum and the chaos, God's presence can meet us and gives us a life giving perspective that brings freedom. I say this not to bring guilt, but to bring life- life in the full. John 10:10- reminds us that Jesus came to this world so that we may have life, and have it in abundance. An abundant life is not one with no struggle and all things good. No it is a life that promises you a never alone. That there is a God who wants to abide with you always. Remaining and abiding produces a spiritual transaction that I cannot explain in words but once you create space for it you will experience a rest for your soul that is described in Matthew 11: 28-30, Jesus said " Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

How fitting are these words. The one who sits at Jesus' feet learns His yoke. Taking on Jesus' yoke is best described as submitting to Jesus as a way of living in the world that is very different from the world's ways of living. Jesus invites you to remain in Him to experience this life.

So how do we create space to turn our whole being toward God so that His presence, will and purpose can be accomplished in our life. The answers to this question are not new, you have heard them all before. The sad truth is most of us want all that Jesus can offer but don't want to change anything, be inconvenienced, or commit to a lifestyle that will produce this. I don't say this to make you feel bad. I am with you. I struggle with all the same things- I live in the same world you do- but I truly don't want to stay there. I may fail but I want to keep at it and believe that the way of Jesus and abiding will continue to create an inner disposition that allows me to live the way God intends me to live. In Philippians 3:13-14, Paul uses the idea of seeing life as a race and encourages us to keep going. This is what he says... "No, brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead. I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling me."

So yes we continue to get knocked down but get up again (isn't that the lyrics of a song?) we pivot and maneuver but we press on for all that God has for us. What are some of the practical things that help us to press on and continue the practice of being with Jesus.

First, we need to practice being in God's presence at all times. Notice I say practice my guess this will be a life time work in progress. Remaining in Jesus needs to happen at all times ,but our tendency is to section times for God and then time for everything else. It seems strange to admit but we do it all the time

and we often attribute language and a certain style to our time with God and our time with everything else. We dress up and go to church or we use deep spiritual terms in our prayer times but we quickly move to the other parts of life and easily leave God on the sidelines. The funny thing is He is still there and sees us and His desire is to be with us but we don't include him. Maybe we are scared to let him into all parts of our life, maybe we don't think we are good enough, or feel that God will judge us, or maybe we don't care. Whatever the reason, I think our perception of Jesus is often off. When you read about Jesus there was not one type of person Jesus would not be around, and when others were judging Jesus called them out. He was compassionate, loving, gracious and people were freed from the many things trapping them up by just being in His presence. This concept of abiding in Jesus encourages us that we can possess God and His presence at all times. Paul in the New Testament refers to this as "Praying without Ceasing." Yes, it might be easier in a quiet time with God to practice this, but we also need to practice being aware and accessing the presence of God in all situations. When you are driving to work and stuck in traffic, writing an email, interacting with others, or sitting on the couch at the end of the day. We need to take time to recognize God, you are here and I am here.

Dallas Willard has a quote that describes this concept well "The first and most basic thing we can and must do is keep God before our minds. This is the fundamental secret for the care of our souls." If you begin to implement the

practice you will start to notice an increase of awareness of how God is part of your day both in you talking to Him and Him talking to you.

Second, another important practice in being with God is embracing some silence in your life. Silence is hard to achieve because of the hyper connectivity we live in because of the digital world. Out of interest I typed the following question in google “What is the average time that people spend on their mobile phones per day?” The answer was as follows: “The average North American spends 5 hours and 24 minutes on their mobile device each day and checks their phones 96 times per day.” Again, I am right with you. I have an Iphone with all the apps and I struggle to put it down. Yet, awareness of the problem is the first step to change. We are also over extended and most of us have too many tasks to achieve in one day and we often fall into bed exhausted and over connected. Only to wake up and repeat it all again.

We are not going to get away from all of this and I am not saying phones are bad, or a full schedule is wrong, but we are going to have to be intentional in order to allow for silence in our daily lives. Silence gives us a chance to listen to God. It is in this place of quiet before God that we find discernment, clarity, wisdom, strength, and courage to live the way Christ intended us to live.

Letting God meet us in silence often lets us, let go, of our agenda and it allows God to do a deep transformation in us. Does silence mean you need to be still(not

moving)...no. You can find silence in many actions that we do alone: driving in a car, going for a walk or run, closing your office door or washing dishes(my personal favourite) to name a few.

Third, in order to deepen our relationship with God and receive His help it can not be done in a casual or haphazard way. Habits are often the vehicle that deepen our relationship with God. There will be a need for some intentional commitment and re- organization of our own lives and the habits that strengthen our communion with God. I mentioned the habits of silence and practicing the presence of God. There are also the habits we hear about often. Prayer, Bible reading, attending church just to name a few. For many these are habits we all practice and I can never under emphasize the importance of these. A few things to consider while practicing these habits.

One, sometimes even in the practice of a spiritual habit we approach it with a doing attitude. I am going to do my 10 minutes bible reading with God, I am going to pray before bed, I am...Yet, often in these habits we offer little or any time that is open to hear God speak, and for us to listen. When I allow for these moments, God often takes me off script and brings me to new depths in my walk with Him.

The other tendency is we do the habit but don't put into practice what we are learning, declaring and communing with God about.

For example my bible reading may be reminding me to not worry- but is not as easy as just reading this for me to not to worry. If you are like me you may have read this passage of scripture at 9 am and at 9:45am the first worry of the day hits. That is when we put into practice what we just read -we stop and maybe say something like ok God here is here is my first worry of the day...help! How should I approach this?

Why these spiritual habits? Are they just a means to an end? Just another thing to do, to check off our list, another accomplishment to be proud of. The answer if you haven't already guessed is no to all of the above. These spiritual habits allow us to abide in Jesus and to abide in Jesus is to know Jesus and to know Jesus is to live the way of Jesus. Jesus is our human example of how our creator God wants us to live. Not so He can have control of us - but because He made us and our creator can show us how to live the life we were meant to live.

Living In this type of abiding, awareness and connection to God,takes practice as mentioned before probably a life of practice. We will fail and get distracted as we parent, work, volunteer, grand parent, eat, sleep, and in general just live. If we continue to orient ourselves with God at the center we begin to operate our lives

differently because being in His abiding presence is the great longing of our soul.

So let's take the last few moments to let you go into the quietness of your heart to assess where you are at with being with God?

You may be in a season of life where abiding is your regular practice and my guess is because you do this you are experiencing deep communion and a life of fullness in Christ that will continue to deepen until you see Christ face to face. Let me encourage you to keep going and continue to shine your light of Christ to others around you. Also if I can encourage, mentor and be open to discuss how you came to these points with others. Not in a prideful way but in a way of encouragement to what God is doing in your life...this is community

You may be like me where this is your deepest desire but you easily get off track and you need to re-arrange and re-orient things in order to create the rhythms that allow you to center your life around abiding with Jesus.

Let me encourage you to not fall into the lie that this is not achievable or too spiritual. Not one of the investments that I have made in creating time with God has returned void for me. Again, my words may fall short in explaining this but re-committing to this will give you something that nothing else in life can fill.

Don't be afraid to start small as you reorient your life to create space for God.

Step by step I like to say and God will give you his Daily Bread. Share where you

are at with others - community allows us to spur each other on to good things and also meet one another in the struggle.

You may be skeptical of this idea, and that's ok. God can handle us wherever we are. Just read the Psalms and you will be reminded that when we seek God we don't have to have it all together. He can handle our hurts, frustrations, questions and doubts- because He is real and desires to have an active role in your life. Jeremiah 29:13 reminds us "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Try to not be afraid to share your thoughts with others in this community. Again, we all question, struggle and doubt and we need to get better at just sharing in the dialogue of our faith journey's as this is another way we learn and grow as a community

To conclude In our desire to follow God's call by serving him with everything we have, we can easily find ourselves worried, overcommitted and distracted. In a culture that exalts the "we-can-do-it-all" mentality, we have a teacher who invites us to learn his way and adopt his priorities. Instead, we remain and abide in Jesus by sitting at his feet. We receive and absorb his love. We hear Jesus's word, and these words remain in us. For apart from him, we can do nothing (John

15:5). Jesus declares that “one thing” is needed as his disciple: a kind of attentiveness to Jesus that glories in his presence, and this type of serving will bear eternal fruit.

Benediction: From Ephesians- The Message

“Let us kneel before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out - all heaven and earth. I ask Him to Strengthen you by His spirit- not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength - that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite Him in. And I ask Him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you’ll be able to take in with all the followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth. Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights. Live full lives, full in the fullness of God.”