

TAKING A WALK WITH A TURTLE
Luke 10:38-42

There's a story about an elderly couple who were becoming somewhat forgetful. One night as they were getting ready for bed they agreed they were hungry and wanted a late night snack. They decided they wanted ice cream sundaes. The husband volunteered to go to the kitchen to make the sundaes. His wife said that he always forgets what she wants. He insisted he would not forget, that he could remember perfectly what she wanted. So she asked him to make her a sundae with vanilla ice cream, some sliced banana, chocolate sauce, whipped cream and a cherry. He repeated it to make sure he had it exactly as she wanted. Then he headed to the kitchen. He was gone about ten minutes and when he returned he handed her a ham sandwich saying, "just like you ordered." She looked at it and cried, "See! I told you that you wouldn't remember. You forget the mustard."

Last night I had a little episode that made me think of that story. Laurie and I were putting lights on our Christmas tree and found several of our strings were dead. We had to go to the store to get more. We got into the car and headed for the store. After maybe two minutes of driving Laurie said, "Rick, where are you going?" I said, "To the store, of course." It was only at that moment that I realized I had driven in a totally wrong direction, a direction that was taking us away from the store that was our destination. Now you may be thinking that like in that opening story people of a certain age can become forgetful and that was my problem last night. But what actually happened was I got distracted from what I was supposed to be doing, as I will explain a little later, and lost track of where I should have been going.

Getting distracted can be dangerous when you are driving. Or it can simply result in lost time as it did for us last night. But we can also get distracted in living our lives. Distraction can lead to all kinds of problems in life. Today we will see an example of that as we look at Luke 10:38-42. Let's think about this passage in the context of this series of sermons that are about simplifying our lives. Christian author and speaker, Gordon MacDonald, made a startling statement. He said that busyness is a greater threat to the soul than pornography ever was. This is not to say that pornography isn't a problem, but that our busyness is a lurking, unnoticed danger. Today we will see a snapshot of how that might be true as we look at this familiar story from Luke's gospel.

MARTHA HAD AN EYE PROBLEM

Verse 38 tells us that Jesus and his disciples were on their way, meaning going about their itinerant ministry when they came to a village which we know to be Bethany. Three people, two sisters and one brother, who lived there at some point became great friends of Jesus. Their names were Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Martha apparently was the oldest of the siblings, for in this and another passage she seems to take the lead. Martha opened her home to Jesus. This was a wonderful act of hospitality. It was also more than a minor undertaking. When you opened your home to Jesus you were also opening your home to his disciples, which meant you were taking on 13 house guests, plus other visitors who might drop in.

So you've got Jesus, the disciples, and the three that lived there. That meant a minimum of 16 people for dinner, and it could have been more than that. Martha had taken on quite a large task. By the way, recently archaeologists made some discoveries about Martha and family. They've learned their last name was Stewart. Lazarus Stewart, Mary Stewart and Martha Stewart. Just kidding. But it sure does seem in this story Martha is at least related somehow to Martha Stewart. Have you ever prepared a meal for 16 people? That's no mean feat. I've never done that. Laurie has, and I have to tell you I don't know how she pulls it off. Every year in May I encounter a challenge. Laurie's birthday is May 9, which is right around Mother's Day and sometimes is right on Mother's Day. This can make life a little complicated. I have usually tried to simplify things by having one party, a dinner where we celebrate Laurie's birthday and Mother's Day for both Laurie and my mom. But that is not without its own issues. Mother's Day of course is always on a Sunday. Sundays tend to be very busy and tiring for me. One solution is we could go out for dinner, but on Mother's Day that is usually crazy because restaurants are jammed. So my solution has been that I will cook a meal at home for our family on this day of celebration, usually around 6 of us. I have found that to be so challenging. Typically I barbecue something. There always comes this time when the meat on the grill is just about done, but the asparagus is boiling over, the rolls need to come out of the oven, the potatoes are not quite done, somebody needs to pour tea or lemonade. It all happens at once and it is almost paralyzing because I have to do 4 different things at once or the meal will be ruined. Almost invariably Laurie has to come to my rescue.

Imagine Martha trying to pull together a meal for 3 times as many people and doing it without an oven, a barbecue, a gas stove, a microwave or a refrigerator. She was also housing the boys that night, so someone had to find bedding and

towels for everybody. What a madhouse it must have been. Poor Martha was busier than a one-legged Riverdancer.

I can see Martha flying around the house at Mach 1 trying to do twelve things at once. At one point she noticed she wasn't getting much help from her sister, Mary. She looked around for her and found her. Guess what Mary was doing? She was in the living room, sitting on a couch watching a football game with Jesus and the boys. Okay, that's not quite right. That statement may be a reflection of my own guilt because it is possible that once or twice it may have happened that when Laurie has been buried in preparations for a big Thanksgiving or Christmas meal her most helpful husband has been found watching a football game.

No Mary wasn't watching a football game, but she also wasn't helping Martha with the work. She was sitting and listening to Jesus as he taught. It's not hard to imagine what flashed through Martha's brain. "I love listening to Jesus. I'd much rather go in the living room and relax, take time to be with Jesus and learn from him. Who wouldn't? But if I do that who's going to do the work? Why does Mary think I ought to do all the work and she should just get to spend time with Jesus? That's not fair!"

So Martha goes to Jesus to get some help. She says, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" There are some interesting aspects to what Martha did there. First, observe that Martha didn't talk to Mary directly. She didn't go and patiently ask her for some help. Instead she opted for a power play. Talk to Jesus and get him to make Mary do some work. Mary might say no to Martha but she wouldn't say no to Jesus.

Second, note that she actually tried to lay a little bit of guilt on Jesus. "Don't you care?" She's accusing Jesus of not being fair and not caring about her and the fact that she is obviously having to carry way more than her share of the burden. Last, notice that she *orders* Jesus to tell Mary to get to work. Did you catch the obvious contradiction? She addresses Jesus as Lord but then tells him what to do.

I think we can all empathize with Martha. I envision her as a capable, efficient person, a hard worker. She actually was a little in the Martha Steward mold, because she cared about her guests. She wanted to make them feel welcome and at home. She's trying to do a good and loving thing by taking care of them. All of us have at some time been in the situation in which we took on some task thinking we would be part of a team, only to see the other people flake out and leave us holding

the bag. We know that resentment that comes from feeling like everybody else dropped the ball and we're the ones who have to kill ourselves to avert a disaster. Have you ever been in that situation where you are slavishly burying yourself to finish the job with no one else around, picking up all the details they were supposed to see to but didn't, now resentful of all those who bailed out, grumbling to yourself about all the work and vowing, "I'll never do this again. I'll finish it this time but this is the last time." That's a scene that gets repeated over and over in this world. The diligent one always gets the raw deal. It could be a group project in school, working in the children's ministry, planning and executing an event, just keeping up the home. All of us know Martha's frustration.

However, even as we empathize with Martha we can see some warning signs that indicate there was a problem. Verse 40 tells us that she was "distracted." That is a significant word. What happens when you are distracted? You focus on something that isn't the main thing you should be doing. Something other than the main thing grabs your attention. Last night when we drove to get more Christmas lights I got distracted. As we were backing out of our driveway I noticed that our neighbors across the street had put up some outdoor Christmas lights. I love Christmas lights. I reflected that on a street close to ours many of the houses put up great displays during the Christmas season and I wondered if they already had them up. So I turned down that street to see the lights. I forgot that going that way was the wrong direction. I lost sight of the real goal, which was to go to the store and got off on a tangent because of the distraction.

I find that I often am all too easily distracted. If I am in a conversation with people in a room and someone turns the television on, I'm in trouble. That's especially true if there's a sporting event on. I get distracted. I have a terrible time staying focused on the conversation because my attention is grabbed by the television. It's curious that it tends not to work the other way. If I'm watching a sports event on television and Laurie talks to me it's amazing that somehow it doesn't distract me. It's like I'm in the cone of silence, just me and the television. All of a sudden something she says will break through the cone of silence. I will hear, "Did you hear what I asked you?" Oh, yes, uh sure I did. The answer is yes, of course. Then she'll say, "I asked you what you would like to eat for dinner." Oops. Martha had gotten distracted from something. The Greek word Luke used literally meant "dragged away." There was something important that Martha should have been doing, but her need to get all the details just right had dragged her away from doing the most important thing.

We can see the effect of Martha's distraction. Notice Jesus' description of Martha in verse 41. "Martha, Martha, you are worried..." You can stop right there. Martha was stressed. She was anxiety-ridden. She was buried under a mountain of details and it all had to be done just right. The result was that she was a mess inside. She was stressed out to the max. Jesus also said she was "upset about so many things." You bet she was upset. She was so burned up about Mary that she had taken to telling Jesus what to do. She was resentful of all that she was doing and of others who were not helping with her agenda.

Those are two warning signs of losing sight of the goal and getting distracted. When we are stressed and when we are upset and resentful of other people there's a good probability that we've gotten off track.

Was Martha trying to do something wrong? No, she was trying to do something good. She was being hospitable. That's not only commendable it is commanded in the Scriptures several times. She was trying to meet the needs of people, loving them by caring for their practical needs. But something has gone wrong. I say she had an eye problem because somewhere in her effort to do a good thing she has gotten her eyes on the wrong thing. She has become distracted, dragged away from doing what really matters. She's looking at the wrong thing.

In 2 Corinthians 1:12 Paul wrote, "Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace." Paul was being criticized in Corinth for a variety of reasons. He defended himself in 2 Corinthians. This verse is part of that defense. The word translated "sincerity" literally meant "simplicity." Paul was saying he had simplicity in his attempts to minister. He did not have some hidden agenda, some mixed motive as some claimed. He lived a simple life because he had a simple and clear goal and motive in all he did. That's where Martha's ship ran aground. Her motive wasn't simple, as we will see in a few moments.

JESUS HAD THE SOLUTION

Jesus identified the problem and had a solution for her. As we look at that we will get some insight into just what went wrong with Martha. What she hoped for and what we sort of expect is that Jesus would say, "Oh, Martha, I'm so sorry. You're so amazing, so longsuffering and have such a spirit of service. Please forgive me for allowing your sister to shirk her duties. Mary, how could you be so lazy? You

need to get to work and help your sister.” But that’s not at all what happened. Instead Jesus, after commenting on Martha’s agitated emotional state said, “Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” In other words, “Good for Mary. She has made a good choice and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Ouch. According to Jesus who has the problem? Martha claimed that Mary had a problem, that she was unwilling to do her share of the work. What does Jesus’ response say? Wrong Martha. Mary has chosen well. *You* are the one with a problem!

What’s going on here? Let’s think it through. First, we have to ask if Mary was completely indifferent to the needs of the guests. Do you think she literally was saying, “I don’t care if Jesus and his friends have anything to eat or have a place to sleep. That’s their problem”? Or do you think she was thinking, “Well Martha should do all the work”? Do you think she was the doted on and spoiled younger daughter, a princess who couldn’t be bothered with mundane chores?

I don’t believe either one of those was true of Mary. I’m certain they were not true of Jesus. I am sure he was not saying, “Hey, you don’t need to take care of your guests” nor was he saying, “I like Mary a lot more than I like you. I think you should do all the work and let her relax.”

So what was he saying? The first clause in verse 42 is absolutely crucial. “Only one thing is needed.” What does that tell you? It tells you that all the things that Martha was stressing about, all the things she was flying around to do, ***were not needed! Martha made the unnecessary, necessary!***

That right there is the formula for having a complicated and stressful life. Make the unnecessary necessary. Make everything important. I think we can take it as a given that Mary cared about Jesus and his friends. I know we can take it as a given that Jesus cared about his disciples. Jesus’ comment here tells me that somehow their needs were provided for. My guess, and this is just my opinion, is that Mary and Martha had already done enough to ensure their guests’ needs would be met. There was a way for their needs to be provided for and for both sisters to then spend time with Jesus. But for Martha Stewart, that’s not good enough. It has to be an event, a gala. It has to be perfect. This was going to be a meal they would never forget. They’d go away saying, “Man, I hope we can stay there again because that Martha knows how to put on a feast fit for a king.”

The thing that was necessary was relationship, particularly relationship with Jesus. Somehow Martha had lost sight of that simple truth. She would rather put on a spectacular meal than spend time with Jesus and learn from him. There's a key element in what happened to Martha. She's very much like most of us, and we can see that in this story it was an eye problem. She put her eye on the wrong thing.

Somewhere in her feverish activity the point got lost. She started off with a good goal, but according to Jesus she had lost sight of that goal. What was needed to meet the goal had been taken care of. So now her efforts were about something else. The point had shifted from meeting their needs to impressing them. In an almost undetectable way it was no longer about them, it was now about *her*.

2 Corinthians 11:3 Paul wrote, "I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ." Again the word "sincere" meant simple. That's what happened to Martha. She was led astray from simple devotion to Christ into promoting herself.

APPLICATION

All right, so Martha made a mistake. By the way, let's remember there was a great deal good about Martha. The mistake she made was one we make regularly. She was like us, a flawed human being who loved Jesus and was in the process of learning a new way to live from him. But what does this say to us?

In the middle of the 19th century a certain type of individual showed up in Paris. This type of person was called a flaneur, which came from a French word that meant "to stroll." The flaneur spent time slowly walking around Paris, watching people, enjoying the scenery. Some accused the flaneurs of being idle and lazy. But many celebrated them as people who were taking in the beauty of life itself, strolling slowly through the city, appreciating the sights and sounds of the earth, the city and the people. Victor Fournel wrote that being a flaneur was a way of "understanding the rich variety of the city landscape." It became popular among the flaneurs as a sign of their desire to go slowly through life and drink it all in to take turtles for a walk and let the turtle set the pace.

I present to you two extremes: one is the flaneur, the other is the hard-driving, workaholic, type A person. Of those two, which would you guess Martha was closest to, which was Mary closest to? Those are extremes, of course, and the two

sisters were certainly neither of them. But you see the point. Mary was able to slow down and appreciate the best life could offer, being with Jesus, while Martha was driven to the point of stress and resentment. Jesus called both of them and us as well to slow down and be with him. What can help us take a walk with a turtle, slow down and be with Jesus?

ASK YOURSELF SOME QUESTIONS:

DO YOU EVER HAVE TROUBLE SAYING NO?

We are in the land of overcommitment. People live at faster than the speed of sound in order to get their kids to all their programs and lessons and get their schoolwork done, to meet the demands of work and family, to handle all the commitments they make. Back in March in *New York* magazine reporter Lisa Miller had an article that said Americans have become a Xanax society. People are so full of anxiety, so stressed they are relying routinely on this drug to chill out. *The New York Times* published an article in June titled “The Busy Trap.” It was about how crazy busy people are today. The article created an enormous response because it struck home with so many people. I think we’d be a lot better off if we found a way to slow down and lessen the pressure in our lives.

One of the largest contributors to this problem is that we don’t say no. We say yes when we don’t really want to do it and end up with overcommitted lives. The kids want us to enroll them in three sports at the same time. The boss wants us to work more hours. The church wants us to commit to helping with some ministry. An acquaintance wants us to take on planning a big event at the kids’ school or to join the booster club. There’s not necessarily anything wrong with any of those things. But we say yes to them and find ourselves living like Martha, busier than a one legged Riverdancer, when in fact we don’t even like Riverdancing.

Why do we do that? Here is where this ties in to Martha’s experience. We do it because we have an eye problem. We put our eyes on the wrong thing. And usually we’ve put our eyes on the same thing Martha did. We put our eyes on ourselves. We often say yes to people when we’d rather say no because we’re afraid of what they’ll think of us or do to us if we say no.

The kids will resent me, the kids will make my life miserable if I say no to them, the boss will fire me, the church people will think I don’t love Jesus, the acquaintance won’t like me. It’s all about fear for myself. It’s about fear of what

others might think of me especially or do to me, so as a people-pleaser I say yes. Anything to make them happy.

Pastor John Huffman says, “at the heart of each of us is a yearning to be accepted by others.” God created us to be connected to other people. That’s because we were created in the image of God, and a part of the very character of God is relationship. Unfortunately that image of God has been distorted in us by what happened with Adam and Eve in Eden. A lot of good things God has put in us have become twisted. Our desire for connection with people gets twisted into a desperate need to please them, which isn’t really love at all but terrible self-centered fear of rejection.

No one enjoys being disliked or rejected. But we need to recognize we have a pretty simple choice before us. One is to let the fear of what others think or will do dominate us. That is in fact a terrifying and oppressive slavery. The other is to know that God delights in us and loves us and that is enough. In that knowledge there is tremendous freedom to be who we are even if someone else does not like it or rejects us.

When we are secure in God’s love we can choose to not be ruled by the opinions and thoughts of others. We can follow the example of Jesus who was never daunted by the opposition of powerful people because he knew his Father loved him.

Paul knew rejection. He was violently rejected by his former friends and colleagues when he put his faith in Jesus. They hated him and wanted to kill him. Then he had to deal with new brothers in Christ who didn’t like him because he had injured them or loved ones before his conversion. He was opposed by people in the church because of his consistent message of grace. Some said he wasn’t really an apostle, even some of his own converts rejected him. In 1 Corinthians 15:5-7 he related some of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. In verses 8-9 he said, “last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” The word Paul used that is translated “one abnormally born” was, according to Gordon Fee in his excellent commentary on 1 Corinthians, used to “refer to something horrible or ‘freakish.’” So he says, “Yes, I’m a freak, something horrible in the eyes of many.” But in verse 10 he says, “But by the grace of God I am what I am and his grace to me was not without effect.”

Paul could have easily bent to make other people like him more. But he said, “By the grace of God I am what I am.” He was able to keep focused on being the apostle of God’s grace and with singularity of purpose and motive keep moving ahead, regardless of what anyone else said, did, or thought. God’s grace to us through his Son, Jesus Christ, is what makes us able to say no when necessary because our eyes no longer must be on ourselves and what others might think of us if we don’t do what they want.

DO YOU MAKE THE UNNECESSARY NECESSARY?

This goes back to what we saw a couple of weeks ago when it comes to having a simple life. We have to have some filter through which we can run the many decisions we face. That filter has to do with what God has called us to be and to do. We must ask, “does this help me with what is necessary in my life, or does it hinder?” If it hinders I should say no. Not everything is necessary. When I was in seminary I had very little time. At one point I was working hard to support myself while going to school full time and running myself into the ground. I had one particular class that was a very good class that was very practical. But the prof gave us some assignments that I felt were just work to do that would not be helpful. I just hadn’t had time to get to them. One day toward the end of the semester he spoke to me and said, “Rick, you’ve got the highest grade in this class. But you haven’t turned these assignments in. They’re late, but your grade is high enough that if you just get them in before the class ends that will be good enough. I want to give you the A you deserve, but you’ve got to do this.” I said, “My focus really isn’t on the grade I get in this class. It’s on preparing for ministry. Do you think doing these assignments is going to make a difference in my preparation? Will it make me better able to do what God calls me to do?” He paused, then said, “Honestly, no, it won’t make any difference.” I didn’t do the assignment. Not everything is necessary.

Many of the problems that occur in the church happen because someone is making the unnecessary necessary. Parents create enormous stress for themselves by doing the same thing. I see parents freaking out to make sure their kids get on the right team, have the right experiences, go to the right schools. So much of it is unnecessary. How different I would have been as a parent if I had known when we were raising our kids what I know now. Do you remember what life was like for that first child? That poor kid had to live in an almost totally antiseptic environment. No germ was allowed within miles of him or her. By the time Toby, our third child, came along and was mobile he would be out in the back yard eating

bugs. I'd see him and think, "Well, the extra protein will be good for him." I became a lot more relaxed and was learning to not let unnecessary things necessary. It is the unnecessary that complicates our lives. We need to focus on what is necessary.

DO YOU SEE THE SIGNS OF LACK OF SIMPLE MOTIVE?

These are the signs that Martha exhibited. Distracted, not having time, energy or focus for the things that really matter. Stressed and worried. Resentful of others. Your service becomes a source of annoyance, irritation and disdain for others. Service with simple motive will be willing and joyful because you are offering it to Christ so it doesn't matter what others do or don't do.

LIVE WITH JESUS AS YOUR AUDIENCE

We must quit worrying about how we will look to other people, about what they will think, and focus just on what God wants us to be and to do. Matthew 6:22. If your eye is simple, your whole body will be full of light. We need to see what Jesus thinks of us as the determining factor in all that we do and think.

About 10 days ago my mother moved out of our house. She got to do something she's wanted to do for a long time, and that's to move into a place of her own. She hired some movers to handle the bulk of the move, oh thank you dear Lord! The day she moved I had a cold that was hitting its peak. At one point I was in the kitchen, Laurie was in another part of the house talking to one of the movers. He asked if she was moving and she explained that it was her mother in law that was moving and that she lived in this house. The mover asked, "Oh, is that your father in the kitchen?" After she stopped laughing Laurie said, "No, that's my husband."

It doesn't thrill me that some guy thinks I'm old enough to be Laurie's father. But Laurie loves me, even when I'm sick. I'm good with that. I don't have to worry about what some mover thinks and fret and try to make myself look younger. I can be secure in the fact that Laurie loves me just as I am, even if it is a mystery why.

Living with Jesus as our audience means letting him set the agenda. Let him determine what is necessary. We at all times should focus on being with him, listening to him, then making our decisions based on his priorities for us. If we do that we will end up a lot less stressed, live at a much more peaceful pace, and will not spend our days chasing rabbit trails that are inevitably dead ends. We will use our lives for eternal purposes that are meaningful.