

***Learning to Pay Attention***  
Psalm 27: 1-4; Luke 10: 38-42  
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## **I. Introduction**

A couple of days after you all had sent me away on my Sabbatical and I was getting settled in Tokyo, I spent a wonderful afternoon at a beautiful, expansive garden called Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden. It's a huge swath of land cut out in the middle of Tokyo and with a number of beautiful gardens, and I spent a long time wandering through the beautiful English garden and French garden and the glorious Japanese garden, all meticulously cared for.

I eventually found a very lovely, quiet little spot with not a lot of traffic, and I pulled out my flute and I played for a little while and I read for a while and prayed for a while and played a little bit more. I had this very visceral experience of just feeling the anxiety and the stress ebb away in a way that I don't know that I've ever experienced as an adult. To have this gift of time where I wasn't plotting out sermons or doing church programming, just to be in the moment, was this unbelievable gift, and I am so grateful to you all again for making that possible.

I spent a glorious afternoon in that space and eventually got to feeling a little bit hungry, and so I packed up my bag and started walking out and kept in that sort of psychic space of just being so peaceful and it was so quiet and it felt like I had the whole place to myself. And as I walked, I started to notice I really did have the whole place to myself, there wasn't another person around. And the reason for that became clear as I approached the gate and realized that they had closed the garden some period before and locked everything down and I was on the wrong side of an eight-foot fence with tall spikes at the top.

So, as I was climbing over this fence, I was trying to figure out how I was going to explain to the Eli Lilly Foundation why I had been deported from Japan for trying to break into a national historic site. And I realized that God's sense of humor was still richly intact and that maybe, just maybe, you can have too much contemplation. So, for those of you who were worried that I wasn't going to get to that place, I got to it very quickly!

## **II. Mary and Martha**

But the point that Jesus is making in this wonderful story about Mary and Martha is that too much contemplation is rarely a risk for most of us. The story of Mary and Martha is highlighting the fact that for most of us the risk is that the frenetic pace of our lives overwhelms any opportunity we have to sit in the stillness and to listen for the voice of God.

We're all Marthas here, right? I mean, everybody in our church family is busy and overcommitted, and frankly nobody in any church likes the story of Mary and Martha. And if you ask any preacher, every time they preach on this story, they're going to have somebody come through the line or several people come through the line and say something like this, "Well, it's all very fine for Jesus to have supported Mary, but who is going to put that dinner on? And who is going to greet the guests?" It sort of solidifies in most people's minds the fact that Jesus wasn't particularly realistic frankly and he should've been thinking a little bit more clearly about that.

The point of the story though is not to affirm that contemplation is preferable to action. The story in fact takes place immediately after Jesus has been teaching about the Good Samaritan which is all about how we put what we say we believe into action. So, Jesus is not holding up Mary as a higher model than Martha. Jesus is simply pointing out that in a world of Martha, a little Mary is not a bad thing to balance out the frenetic pace of life. We live in a Martha society where we are worried and distracted by many things.

Professor Leonard Sweet in his most recent book on evangelism called *Nudge* says that we live in an ADD society, and I think it not accidental that the Centers for Disease Control have noted that over the last eight years, there has been a 42-percent increase in the diagnosis of ADHD in our country. We always feel fragmented and pulled in many, many different directions. And I'm going to suggest that that is the case because we like it that way. We like being pulled in a lot of different directions because sometimes the silence is too hard for us, too awkward for us, and because it helps us feel at least a little bit in control. It allows us to feel like our lives are meaningful and purpose-filled.

Have you noticed when you ask people how they're doing and they say, "Oh, you wouldn't believe how busy I am, and I was doing this and that," we like that, right? We're bragging for being overcommitted because there is some piece of us that believes that we are more valuable because we are busy. And what Jesus is suggesting to us in this story is you are not more valuable because you are busy. Your value flows solely from the fact that you are sacred and loved children of God. That is what gives you purpose and value. And while that means we also have a lot of work to do, that work is not what defines us or makes us who we are. It is God's call on us that defines us and makes us who we are. And so, if we really want to be who God has created us to be, that means making sure that we have some balance and we have some Mary that is part of our life so that we can sit and listen at the feet of Jesus.

### **III. Paying Attention**

In a lot of the Hebrew Scriptures, God's epiphanies to us are big and dramatic actions. There are clouds of pillar and fire and there's parting of the Red Sea and there're burning bushes. They are things that you're not going to miss that show you that God is at work and God works in dramatic ways many times. But Jesus reminds us often that God also works in some very quiet, very subtle, very delicate ways, and if we are

not paying attention, we're going to miss that. So that Mary being held up is Jesus' way of affirming that activity is good and important and needs to be balanced with an ability to step back and breathe a little bit more deeply, to take a Sabbath, to take a break, to take three deep breaths in the midst of the chaos and center so that we can listen for that still, small voice. Jesus wants us like Mary to claim the right not to be scattered and fractured and fragmented, but to periodically take the space that we need to quiet ourselves and listen. Because, see, once we start to do that, once we start to listen a little bit more carefully, everything else starts to shift. As you noted in Janet's children sermon, when you start looking for Waldo, a lot of other things start to become apparent. You start to see God moving in a lot more places. It's a matter of training your eye.

When we were growing up, my family used to spend some vacations at Scientists' Cliffs down on Chesapeake Bay. We used to do a lot of hunting for shark's teeth. Did you ever do that? My sister killed us all. She always had buckets of these things. But what you start to notice is when you start looking for shark's teeth, they're very hard to see because they're so small often. But once you've been doing it a little while, once you get into a little practice, your eye starts to become trained for that shape and you see it all over. Taking some Mary time, taking some silent time is about training our eyes to start to look and listen for where God might be moving, and in doing so, start to develop a sensitivity for where God is moving all the time.

There's a story of a friar who took a 30-day leave to do an Ignatian retreat, which is part of the Jesuit spiritual tradition, and he came back to his community and bumped into one of the grumpy members who was complaining to him about the fact that while he had been off spending all of this time praying, they had been working their fingers to the bone to make this thing work. And the grumpy, old monk says, "You spent all that time away and you don't look different at all." And the friar responded, "I probably don't, but you do." See, when we start to listen, we start to see the people and the situations around us with some different eyes and we start to see where God is moving in quiet, gentle ways.

John Wesley talked a lot about how God's grace moves in our lives, and one of the terms that he used is a term called "prevenient grace." Prevenient means that which goes before. And when John Wesley talks about prevenient grace, he's talking about the fact that God is active and moving every moment in each of our lives all the time even when we're not aware of it or paying attention to it. God's grace is always calling us, nudging us, beckoning us, urging us, and that when we start paying attention, we start becoming more sensitive to where that might be happening. We can start noticing what God's purposes are with more clarity and more regularity.

There's a Spanish poet by the name of Antonio Machado who in one of his poems about Jesus says, "All of your words were one word. Wake up." Wake up to the beauty and life around you. Wake up to the new life being offered to you in the midst of death. Wake up to new directions and new possibilities, because at every moment

God is moving and working and calling. And once we begin to notice that and talk about it, we help other people notice it as well.

#### **IV. Nudging**

Over these fall weeks, every Sunday we're going to be hearing one of our church members share a story about where the Holy Spirit has been moving in their life, and the purpose of that is so that when we hear other people's stories, we start to watch for those places in our own lives a little bit more closely. Part of what we're going to be learning in that process is a new way to think about and do evangelism.

In the book that I was just talking about, Len Sweet defines evangelism as "Awakening each other to the God who is already there." I like that definition, "Awakening each other to the God who is already there." "Evangelism," he says, "is nudging people to pay attention to the mission of God in their lives and to the necessity of responding to that initiative in ways that gives birth to new realities."

#### **V. Conclusion**

So, I am profoundly grateful to you all for having given me a chance to step away and to listen a little bit better, the chance to step away from being worried and distracted by many things and to listen a little bit more carefully for the voice of Jesus. And my hope is that as I carry a little bit more of Mary with me, I can actually also end up being a better Martha as well.

Amen.