

Focusing on the Essential

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Twelve year old Cynthia and her father had been planning their “date” for months. They had a whole itinerary planned down to the minute: she would attend the last hour of his presentation, and then meet him in the back of the room at about 4:30 and leave quickly before everyone tried to talk to him. They would catch a trolley car to Chinatown, eat their favorite Chinese food , shop for a souvenir, see the sights for a while and then catch a movie. Then they would grab a taxi back to the hotel, jump in the pool for a quick swim, order a hot fudge sundae from room service and watch the late, late show. They discussed the details over and over before they left. The anticipation was part of the whole experience.

Things were all going according to plan until, as her father was leaving the convention center, he ran into an old college friend and business associate. It had been years since they had seen each other, and Cynthia watched as they embrace enthusiastically. His friend said, “I’m so glad you are doing some work for our company now. When Lois and I heard about it we thought it would be perfect. We want to invite you and Cynthia to get a spectacular seafood dinner down at the Wharf tonight!” Cynthia’s father responded, “Bob, it’s great to see you. Dinner at the wharf sounds great.”

Cynthia was crestfallen. Her daydreams of trolley rides and ices cream sundaes evaporated in an instant. Plus, she hated seafood and she could just imagine how bored she would be listening to the adults talk all night.

Cynthia’s father just faced one of the most vexing dilemmas of contemporary life – he had the opportunity to do multiple good things at the same time. He could go on date night with his daughter or he could catch up with a good friend whose company had just hired him as a consultant. It was a tough choice.

While we spend much time as parents teaching our children right from wrong, we spend little to no time teaching them that they must also be able to choose right from right, good from good -- the best among choices that all seem pretty close to best.

I suspect we don’t teach them this because we, the adults, are not so good at this ourselves. We are much more prone to say yes and yes and yes to

as many good things as we possibly can, avoiding the enormously difficult task of seeking the one essential thing that is truly the best among the good.

Jesus's friend Martha had this same problem. Luke tells us that Jesus went by her house for a visit. Likely it was unannounced, of course, since there was not such thing as calling ahead or sending a text message to see if it was OK to stop by. Jesus, and likely others with him, simply show up at the door.

Martha greets him graciously, I'm sure, and then as he makes himself at home, she scrambles around -- probably getting him something to drink, looking to see what she has to feed her guests and beginning the prep work for the meal. Perhaps she anticipates they might also need lodging that night and she is trying to figure out how she will accommodate that as well.

Meanwhile, her sister Mary is sitting with Jesus and the guests, just listening to them talk. Martha gets frustrated. I'm not sure why Martha asks Jesus to intervene, but she does -- "Lord, my sister has left me to do all the work. Tell her to help me."

Jesus says, "Martha, you are worried and upset about many things but few are needed -- or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."

Well... Easy for him to say. He is the guest. His hard work for the day is done and hers, unanticipated I might add, has just tripled in magnitude. Dinner will not make itself. Faced with so many things that need to be done, there does not seem to be simple ONE right focus.

I said that Cynthia's father was facing one of the dilemmas of contemporary life. But I suppose this story in Luke indicates that it is actually a human dilemma that spans centuries.

As human adults, we have always had a lot to do. We are pulled in many different directions. There are many tasks at work and home, with family and friends and church and neighbors -- that all demand our time and attention. We feel guilty if we don't do things that we know are good to do -- and we juggle multiple balls in the air simultaneously, just hoping that we won't drop any. The question we don't often ask ourselves is -- what is the cost of being so busy?

I occasionally hear business trainers talking about the reality that multi-tasking is actually not efficient. Trying to do many things at once is more than the human brain can handle. You don't give anything your full attention when you do two things at once because your brain has a finite ability to focus. No one disputes this truth. But when a trainer or teacher says this, people politely listen and then roll their eyes at each other – like who is he kidding? I've got so much to do, multi-tasking is the only way it is going to all get done. It feels like if we don't run fast enough, the tasks that face us will just get out of control.

When my daughter was 10, I decided to leave my big, demanding job and start working as a consultant. This involved a significant pay cut for me so I saw a need to explain to her the implications of me changing jobs. She listened as I said that we wouldn't be able to go to McDonalds as often and we probably would watch movies at home now instead of in the theater. When I finished she simply asked – “If you do a different job, can we have more family game nights?” When I said yes I thought so, she simply said – “Good. I don't care that much about McDonalds.”

I'm sad to say that as I think back on it, I'm not sure we had more family game nights. Because the busy-ness of one job was simply replaced with the busy-ness of another. And there was still the laundry and the grass and the church activities and all the things that would cause me to see the evening as simply the last few hours to get things done, rather than the time to play with my kid.

She's 26 now and gone. Probably appropriately, I hear very little from her. And I regret all the evenings I filled up with work or chores.

In her book, *Plan B, Further Thoughts on Faith*, Ann Lamott writes that every few weeks she takes a walk with her friend Jack, who is the founder of a meditation center. She writes, “He teaches his students, and has taught me, to slow down, breathe, and take care of everyone, which is, of course the same message Jesus taught – that breath is our connection to the holy spirit, to our bodies and minds and soul; and that if the devil can't get you to sin, he'll keep you busy.”

That is the problem. Busy-ness and the worry of doing many things keeps us from being connected – to ourselves, to others and to God. It is not that there is anything wrong with work or activities or chores. It is that when we are so focused on moving quickly from one thing to another to another – we miss being truly present in the moments we are living. We miss being truly

present with the people we love. We miss being truly present to the Spirit of God.

I used to think the scurrying about could only truly stop once the kids grew up, but I actually got busier once they were not there to demand my time. Then I thought that a more sane focus must be what you get in retirement. But I now know a lot of retired people, and many of them say they are busier now than they ever were. So kids and work are not necessarily the causes of our distraction.

It's us. Jesus seems to say that. Martha is focused on and worried about many things. So are we.

I recently read a book by Greg McKeown entitled *Essentialism, The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. In this book he makes a compelling case that when we are so busy all the time, we rob ourselves of the chance to make our greatest contribution to the things that really matter. So not only do we get disconnected from ourselves and from God, we may look like we are really productive and successful— but we may well be cheating what truly matters.

The problem, of course, is figuring out what really matters. So what is it that Jesus is telling Martha that truly matters? What is “the one right thing” that Mary is focused on? He never really says – at least not then.

But, in his life, of course, Jesus communicated consistently in words and behavior, what he saw as essential – to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and love your neighbor as yourself.” That is what truly matters. That is the one, essential thing.

For Martha, though, and for us – dinner must still be made and the dishes must be done and the grass must be cut and the kids need to be taken to soccer and a bunch of colleagues are waiting for our reply to their emails. So what may be clearly essential is not simple to stay focused on. But if we are at least clear about it – that what is most important is to love God and our neighbor – at least that is the touch point we can constantly go back to.

If our busy-ness is the “devil’s work” as Ann Lamott jokes, it is so because it keeps us from remembering our touch point. Constant worry and running around keeps us from staying aligned with what should be our central aim.

Cynthia’s father said to his friend, “Bob, it’s so great to see you. Dinner at the wharf sounds great. But not tonight. Cynthia and I have a special date

planned.” And with that, he winked at her, grabbed her hand and ran out of the door with what was an unforgettable night in San Francisco.

Cynthia’s father was the famous author and management consultant, Stephen Covey, who wrote among other things *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of the things Covey was famous for saying was “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”

That is our challenge. That is our calling. That is what will save us.