Art of Neighboring – week 2
Making Time for Neighboring Luke 10:38-42

Last Sunday we began our four week series on the Art of Neighboring by asking the question, "Who is my Neighbor?" Following the work of Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, we identified "neighbor" as those that live closest to us. We had homework last week. We took this grid and we were challenged to see how well we actually knew the folks who lived close by. How did you do on your homework? I suspect that like me, you discovered you had some work to do in getting to know and learning to love your neighbors.

Today, we are going to talk about the number one obstacle to loving our neighbors – (PAUSE) time. Why is time such a big issue? Well, we live in a world that values activity, production and results. And here is a one of the great paradoxes of our day – we have more time saving devices than ever before, but it seems we have less and less time to get things done. There are always more things on our to-do lists, one more text, voice mail, email or social media post to respond to. We live at warp speed – zipping through our days, too often swinging through a fast food drive through and eating in our cars. When we do interact with others, we're often rushed – and that doesn't leave anyone feeling loved and cared for, does it? John Ortberg calls this "hurry sickness" and he asserts that hurry and love are incompatible.

As many of us careen through our days, we often do so holding on to 3 myths that seem harmless, but which actually wreak havoc on our lives.

The first myth is that things will settle down someday. How many of you hold to this myth? For church staff, it's if we can just get through Advent or Christmas, or Lent or Easter or VBS things will settle down. For teachers it's if we can just get through back to school night, the first grading period, or SOL's things will settle down. As parents we say it will be better when the kids are out of diapers, when they start school, when the finish ball season, (Does this sound familiar)?

The second myth that we often live with us that a little bit more will be enough, a little bit more will be enough – one more purchase, one more achievement, one more promotion or raise, and we will have arrived. But for the vast majority of us, that day never comes either, does it?

The third myth is that everybody lives at this frantic pace. Everybody's life is as hectic as ours is. I was raised in Maryland, just outside of Washington DC, where the pace of life is pretty fast. It was a huge culture shock for me to leave the metro DC area to attend college in a very small town in east TN. The first few weeks I about went crazy. At the grocery store or the drug store, or the local diner – everybody seemed to know everybody, and they thought nothing of pausing to chat with the hostess or cashier – no matter how many people were in line behind them. The first month or so I fidgeted and just wished everybody would get on with. I

was just as surprised when I returned home at Thanksgiving how much I had adjusted to the slower pace of life. The first day or two I was back I just wanted to call out, "Hey, slow down, take a breath and a break, it will be okay." (PAUSE) Indeed, there are folks who lead healthier lives than the ones we live, and we need to follow their example. In John 10:10, Jesus that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly, he was talking about a life of quality – not one crammed packed day after day.

Today's Scripture passage gives us another example of finding an appropriate balance in our lives. Like last week's story of the good Samaritan, this is a very familiar passage, and many scholars believe it functions as a parable – meaning it has a twist. Often when we hear a sermon on this story, Mary and Martha are pitted against each other, and Mary emerges as the clear winner every time. But once again, the story is more nuanced than that.

You probably remember that Mary and Martha (and their brother Lazarus) were some of Jesus' closest friends. I picture their home as Jesus' home away from home, somewhere he could go and relax and enjoy generous hospitality. Jesus would never have disparaged Martha for working to extend hospitality – in fact – Jesus and his disciples depended on the generosity and hospitality of others throughout their travels. And did you notice that is Martha that welcomes Jesus – not Lazarus or Mary – Martha is exercising authority here on behalf of the household.

So what is the deeper issue here? As the story opens, it appears that Martha is busy – overwhelmed really - with the many

tasks that come with hosting unexpected company. I can't fault Martha a bit here, can you? Friends, if Jesus were coming to your house for dinner after church– and bringing 12 hungry disciples with him, wouldn't you be a bit overwhelmed? And I don't think I could serve the group hot dogs and chips on paper plates in the backyard either. If Jesus were coming, I'd want everything to be just so –Martha –we get it. And Jesus isn't upset with Martha for working on his behalf. In fact, the word for her service in this story is *diakonia* – the same root word from which we get our word deacon or servant. In many ways, Martha is exactly the type of person Jesus would want to be on his team. She has a servant's heart and she is committed to seeing a job through.

But on this day, it seems that Mary, Martha's likely partner in service, has abandoned her - and Martha is left to handle the service on her own. Where is Mary? Sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him teach. Can you imagine Martha when she realizes this? Can you hear what is going through her mind? "Well, I'd like to be in the family room soaking up Jesus' teaching too, but somebody has to feed this crowd."

What happens next fascinates me. Martha's frustration boils over, I picture her marching into the living room, hands on hips, where she interrupts Jesus' teaching to complain about her sister. I'm not sure I would have had the courage to interrupt Jesus, would you? I would have probably just stewed in the kitchen and given Mary the silent treatment the rest of the day. The fact that Martha is comfortable interrupting Jesus lets us know that Jesus is

family, not company, it speaks to the bond and intimacy that this adopted family shared.

After the parable of the Good Samaritan, what would the people in the room have expected from Jesus? It would have been ideal if he had said, "Sorry Martha, we'd didn't mean to stick you with all the work, we'll all take a break and help you," but it is the first century after all. A more realistic expectation would have been for Jesus to remind Mary that she should be helping her sister serve. Remember, Jesus doesn't fault Martha for her hospitality — he is upset because she has allowed herself to become distracted and overwhelmed.[i] He is upset that she has lost the joy she found in her service. "It's not worth that," Jesus is saying. But this is where the twist of this parable comes in.

Instead of doing what Martha asks, Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better thing, and he won't take it away from her. As much as I can't blame Martha for being upset, I can't blame Mary for wanting to be where she is either. She wanted to sit at the feet of her beloved Jesus, she wanted to hear him teach and to be in on the discussion. Sitting at the Lord's feet was a common term for discipleship – and she wanted in. She didn't care that it broke the social conventions of the day, it didn't matter to her that some didn't think she should be there or that she had left Martha with no help ---- and it didn't matter to Jesus either. Once again moving walls and going against convention, Jesus affirms Mary's right to be there, to be a disciple.

As I mentioned earlier, often when we hear this story preached, Mary and Martha are pitted against each other, and Martha comes up the loser. But John Donahue and other New Testament scholars assert that this is not how we should interpret this story.

You see, the true power of this story comes in interpreting it together with the story of the Good Samaritan that we talked about last week, the story that just precedes this one in the text. First, Jesus tells a man - a lawyer who is used to sitting in the seat of power, to love his neighbor - to go and do – to offer hospitality and sacrificial service.. Then he breaks social convention by affirming a woman's right to sit and be, to love God and grow in discipleship. Taken together, these two parables paint a new picture of the kingdom of heaven.

Taken together, these stories beautifully illustrate the greatest commandments – to love God and love our neighbor. Taken together, these stories tell us that true discipleship is not only sitting at the feet of the Lord and listening and learning and it is not only serving our neighbor - it's both/and. In order to be able to **do**, we have to have the foundation that only comes from sitting at the feet of the Lord. We are commanded to do, but first we have to be with God – to know God and love God. We are to live our lives in balance.

So how do we do this? Here are three practical suggestions this morning to help us create time to love God and love our neighbors.

First – we need to be intentional about focusing on what is truly important. If we're not intentional about our choices, choices will be made for us, won't they? What are the big rocks you need to put in your jar first? What are the other smaller things that are optional?

The second thing that will help us is to eliminate the time stealers in our lives. What do you tend to waste time on? For many of us, it's time online. Whether we surf on our phones or our computers, it is so easy to get sucked in to games, videos, shopping sites, Facebook, the list is endless. Now there is nothing wrong with down time and enjoying these things in moderation, but did you know that these activities are designed to be addictive. Recently, Kashmir Hill, a technology reporter for the NY Times, wrote an article about how addicted she was to her smart phone. Her Apple device reported that she reached for her phone over 100 times a day and she realized she was way too attached to it. So what did she do? For one whole month, she traded her $1,300 iPhone for a $108 flip phone that made calls, texts with only the 9 number keys to type on, and took only grainy photos.

Despite the inconveniences of not having GPS navigation and all the apps she had come to depend on, Kashmir discovered a new found freedom from unplugging. She read more, was more present with her children, and began to sleep better. Her husband noted that she looked less stressed. When here experiment was over, Kashmir went back to her iPhone, but with much more intentionality.

So where are you wasting too much time? What is a good thing you might cut back on or set aside to be more present to your family and neighbors?

Finally, the third strategy is to be interruptible. It's easy to get annoyed when someone interrupts our hectic lives, isn't it? But Henri Nouwen asserts, interruptions are our ministry. If a neighbor calls or stops by, how can we view that as an opportunity to love them and build relationship with them instead of an inconvenience?

I pray that you can join in me in our three strategies so that we can all make time to live the greatest commandment of loving God and loving our neighbors. Amen.

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[i] In this sermon I draw on the work of John R. Donahue in The Gospel in Parable, p. 134 and ff.