

Pastor Michael D. Costello
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Luke 10:38–42

“Divine Distractions”

Following several years of study with my first piano teacher as a child, it was time to take the next step. On the recommendation of a coworker, my mother reached out to someone who was willing to take me on as a student. But he warned us that he only accepted serious students.

My lessons with this teacher often took place in the choir room of the church where he was minister of music. This large, cold, church basement room with a grand piano in the center had in the room, high on a shelf, surrounding us, the faces of famous composers in the form of clay busts. The intimidation factor was real as I struggled through lessons with Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms looking on. My eyes would often wander around the room while my teacher was trying to teach me, pondering this great cloud of musical witnesses.

For me they were nothing but a distraction. At one lesson my teacher paused from his explanation of a new technique, clapped in my face, and barked, “Stop looking around the room and look at me. Listen to me!” His call to attention seemed rather sudden and harsh as a young student. But not as much as that time I was told to pack my things and get out because I hadn’t practiced. Or, at another lesson, I was called a “lazy lout.”

Okay, I might not have studied with a great motivator, but I learned a lot from him, and we grew to be very close, especially after his retirement. He became my first organ teacher and I give thanks to him for laying a lot of the groundwork for what I do today as a profession. But the distractions in that room were real.

And they are easier to come by now more than ever. My kids are constantly reminding me to ignore my phone while I’m driving. E-mail accounts, text messages, and social media notifications regularly summon us away from our primary tasks. There are even distractions from our distractions, with ever-increasing ads showing up in even the shortest videos and reels online. I have seen statistics that the average digital worker changes applications approximately 1,200 times per day. No wonder we are often feeling stretched so thin and flat out exhausted.

The answer, my social media feed tells me, is to download an app that will automate tasks and reply to e-mails using artificial intelligence. That very well may be true. But today’s gospel reading seems to be telling us something different. Don’t worry. This sermon isn’t about putting down your phone, deleting your social media accounts, or checking your e-mail less often, though for me that might be good advice.

“Do you not care,” Martha asked Jesus, “that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?” It is tempting here to psychologize Martha and assume how she was feeling. But Luke only gives us this one question from Martha, and so we’re left wondering:

- Was she resentful about having to do all the work alone?
- Was she annoyed at her “lazy lout” of a sister for just sitting around?
- Was she concerned about the state of the household at the presence of this unexpected visitor?

We cannot know for sure. But what is clear is that Martha had expectations of how things were to be done, expectations of her own making, and that her sister Mary was falling short. How often have we not done something similar when we are overwhelmed by the very worlds we have created for ourselves?

- Maybe it is something at work, where we feel that, to get a task done right, we simply must do it ourselves. And then we mutter under our breath that others aren't doing their part.
- Maybe it is something at home, where we insist that we do the laundry or the cooking because we know, without a doubt, that someone else is going to do it wrong. And then we wonder why they don't step up and do more.
- Or maybe it is something in the world where we have decided that our perspective is the only correct way and that the other must be demonized for thinking differently. And then we wonder why friends and family decline our invitation even for a cup of coffee or a meal.

Martha could have asked Mary for help, but instead turned to Jesus and said: "Do you not care?" How often do we too turn to God and ask something similar?

Fortunately, Jesus, like he did to Martha, calls to each of us by name and says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

What is that better part, we are left wondering? It is Jesus himself. And the gift of new life that he brings is something that will not—indeed, because of Christ's sacrificial death for us it cannot—be taken away.

The issue in our time isn't a matter of what we will do when we find ourselves in the presence of the divine, of whether we will be busybody Marthas or sitting-at-the-feet-of-Jesus Marys. The issue, I believe—with the many things going on in our lives, many of which are indeed distractions—is whether we'll even recognize that we're in the presence of the divine to begin with.

- In other words: Do we see the face of Christ present as a guest in our lives in our coworkers, recognizing their giftedness and how we might work together for the common good?
- Or in our families: Do we see the face of Christ in our spouses, our children, our roommates, and home healthcare workers?
- And in our world: Is there a way that we can have conversations in this time about how and why we think the way that we do and then stop talking long enough to hear others do the same? Is Christ not present in these moments, also?

(Parenthetically, I want to say that there are times when things are broken enough that this kind of approach won't work and isn't what is needed. I am not trying to suggest that we put on rose-colored glasses in the face of true brokenness or abuse, whether that be in the home, workplace, or elsewhere. There are times when we must call out evil when we see it.)

In the times when it is possible, even right, how do we see Christ in the other when old patterns are so long in the tooth? Where in our sinful life does the power come from to do these things? I'm so glad I asked.

The answer is not to look deep within ourselves. Rather, like my childhood piano teacher, Jesus, who comes among us as both host and guest, is saying to us in the most loving way possible: “Listen to me.” “Listen. Taste and see.” “In word and sacrament, I am here.”

It may seem so obvious to us that this building is open every Sunday morning and that we do this thing called worship, but the very purpose of why we gather is sometimes worth repeating because, well, we become distracted. Don’t we?

If we want to see Jesus, start looking around this room, to ponder on the great cloud of witnesses here, and to be caught up in the divine distractions that surround us. This entire edifice is set up to keep our minds on Christ. From windows to carvings of the apostles, from pulpit to the Lord’s Table, from baptismal font to the memorial garden, we are reminded that Jesus Christ is truly present in our midst.

And this is not about Grace Lutheran. This is the gift of the whole Christian Church on earth. In liturgy and song, in word and sacrament, the church offers to you the one and only thing—the better part—the very life of Christ.

This is the place, in this holy gathering, where we see the divine most clearly in our midst, where we sit at the feet of Jesus, and where we receive from him, our guest, the finest gifts of heaven: his body, his blood, for the forgiveness of sins. And then we as Christ’s body are sent forth, not for lack of practice, but because God has given us all that we need to be the very presence of Christ as gift to the world.

So, come here regularly, invite others to listen up with you. Hear the Word of Christ. Share in the Lord’s Supper. Receive the very life of Jesus. And then go forth so that you can be a divine distraction for others.

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.