

## **The Measure of a Christian**

July 21, 2013

Luke 10:38-42

Last Sunday I mentioned that we often hear Christians use the excuse, “I’m too busy” for not doing more of what we are called by Christ to do.

And I noted that I had looked up “busy” in a Bible concordance and found that the word is used only twice in the New Testament and that neither time could it’s use be considered a valid reason for not serving the Lord.

But “I’ve been busy” continues to be one of our favorite self-descriptions. When asked how we’ve been or what we’ve been up to, we like to stress our high activity levels.

It typifies our American culture, which has always emphasized initiative, hard work, and getting things done.

We pastors are certainly not exempt from this trend. Most search committees, or as Presbyterians call them PNCs, are not terribly interested in our Christology or even our devotional lives.

Committee members’ attention is focused like a laser beam on church growth, community involvement, and our ability to connect with young people. Churches want their pastors to be busy.

Of course, that applies to church members, also. We applaud those who “wear several hats”: serving on the session, teaching Sunday school, cooking for church dinners, and singing in the choir.

At home, it’s no different. How many parents set the alarm for 5:30, start breakfast, wake the kids up, get them dressed, send them off to the bus stop, dash to work, and, after school, drive them to soccer practice, and then grab a few burger combo meals in the drive-through?

Late at night, as we toss in our beds, we think about how we’d really like to write that letter or call our children or our grandchildren or even just sit close to our family members and listen to them. Then we defend ourselves by saying, “I’m so busy.”

We have allowed our culture to drive us to think that busyness is virtuous and that we’re behind if we’re not at least as busy as our neighbors.

Somehow we have placed a sense of worthiness on how busy we are. Have you ever been engaged in a conversation and you both seem to be rattling off a list of things you have to be doing for that day or that week?

It's almost as if we're trying to out-do the other person or evoke some degree of sympathy from them.

And all of this creates a lot of stress. I don't know how many of you may have been to Denmark. Outside the Christiansborg Palace in Copenhagen, which is Denmark's Parliament building, there are three stone figures guarding the entrance. They represent the earache, the headache, and the stomach ache.

They were placed there to suggest that if you enter politics, You will have all three!

We do live in a very stress-filled society today, and it affects all of us, not just politicians. And stress can take its toll on us in many ways.

This rubber band will serve as a good illustration. It can be placed under stress, or tension by outside forces, and get all stretched out of shape. Stress does that to us, too. It can get us, as we say, all bent out of shape.

And if the rubber band is held that way long enough, it will lose its elasticity and not be able to return to its normal, relaxed state, and may even snap. But release the tension, the stress, and the rubber band is back to its own shape.

And I think that is the problem a lot of folks today have. We never find that release. We stay stretched, pulled, up tight, and have a really tough time getting back to that relaxed state, free from tension. Some even snap.

There can be many reasons for this, which I won't take time to go into this morning. But certainly one factor can be that which I started out talking about. We're so busy!

Martha was busy, too – busy sweeping the floor, baking bread, and setting the table. When Jesus knocked at the door, she ushered him to a seat, gave him something to drink, and hurried out to check on the meal.

Then she noticed that Mary was just sitting out there in the living room, listening to Jesus. How ridiculous! Here she was frantically managing a three-ring circus in the kitchen, while Mary just sat around.

She marched out to the living room and complained, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me all the work to do by myself? Tell her to help me!"

So here we get a behind-the-scenes look into a real home. Not as comfy-cozy as outside appearances might suggest.

You know, photographs can be very deceptive. Whoever said; "The camera never lies" never had a studio portrait done of themselves or their family.

Studio portrait are perfect prints: Every hair is in place, people are wearing their best clothes, everybody is told to stand or sit in a certain way. Even the background is designed to create the perfect picture.

Yet in reality that family, that home may be the complete opposite of what's in the portrait. Because for the camera and for the public we show one side of ourselves, But in our homes we can often reveal another totally different side.

I'm reminded of a poem by Adiran Plass, called "The Real Problem." It looks at things from a small child's point of view:

*Sunday is a funny day, it starts with lots of noise.  
Mommy rushes round with socks, and Daddy shouts, 'You boys!'*

*Then Mommy says, 'Now don't blame them, you know you're just as bad,  
You've only just got out of bed, it really makes me mad!'*

*My mommy is a Christian, my daddy is as well,  
My mommy says 'Oh, heavens!' my daddy says 'Oh, hell!'*

*And when we get to church at last, it's really very strange,  
'Cause Mom and Dad stop arguing, and suddenly they change.*

*At church my mom and dad are friends, they get on very well,  
But no one knows they've had a row, and I'm not gonna' tell.*

*People often come to them, because they seem so nice,  
And Mom and Dad are very pleased to give them some advice.*

*They tell them Christian freedom is worth an awful lot,  
But I don't know what freedom means, if freedom's what they've got.*

*Daddy loves the meetings, he's always at them all,  
He's learning how to understand the letters of St Paul.*

*But Mommy says, 'I'm stuck at home to lead my Christian life,  
It's just as well for blinkin' Paul, he didn't have a wife.'*

*I once heard my mommy say she'd walk out of his life.  
I once heard Daddy say to her he'd picked a rotten wife.*

*They really love each other, I really think they do.  
I think the people in the church would help them-if they knew.*

Things aren't always as they might seem, and here in our gospel lesson we evidently have some tension in the Mary and Martha home.

And we don't know about Lazarus, their brother. The story of Jesus raising him from the dead is found only in John's gospel, and things in the gospels aren't always recorded in chronological sequence. Lazarus isn't mentioned here – he may or may not have been around.

In any case, though, Martha seems put out with sister Mary and wants Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help with the chores.

But Jesus didn't do that. He surprised her by saying, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There's only one thing that's needed. Mary has chosen something much better, something that won't be taken away from her"

This is a familiar story, and again I would raise the point that I made last week referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Sometimes stories and passages in the Bible can become so familiar to us that we can miss the point, or just gloss over them with a "oh yeah, I know that one" attitude.

Our gospel lesson today is another case in point. Jesus is not simply telling Martha to take a break, as is often thought, and taught. Note that Mary was not stretched out on the sofa, taking a snooze. She was sitting at the feet of Jesus.

I believe that Jesus is telling us that the core of our existence is our life with him. The Christian life is an active life, a life of worship and service, a life of telling the story of God's redeeming love. And its mainspring is Jesus.

At the center of the Christian faith, our faith, is the conviction that Jesus, who was crucified, is not a dead martyr but a living savior. Death could not hold him in its icy grip. Christ rose in triumph and reigns as the head over the church, the body of Christ.

Jesus is present with us today at work, at play, at home, and at the mall. He is as close to us as the air we breathe. The Christian life is life lived in the companionship of Christ.

Henry Scougal was a devout young theologian who taught at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. He died back in 1678 at the tender age of 28. He wrote an influential little book entitled *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (InterVarsity Fellowship, 1961).

George Whitefield, one of the leading evangelists of the Great Awakening, passed on a copy to Charles Wesley in Oxford. It contributed to his conversion.

In his book, Henry Scougal laments that so few people seem to understand what true Christianity is.

Some think, he writes, that Christianity is mainly orthodox notions. They imagine that all God wants is for us to have the correct mental understanding of Christianity. The “right set of beliefs.”

Others think it is a matter of external duties – obeying the laws of the Bible, keeping busy doing the right things. Still others believe that real Christianity is having the right affections and feelings toward God.

But Scougal notes, and I agree, that each of these notions misses the point. The essence of Christianity lies not in the realm of thought, performance, or feelings.

Real Christianity is a union of the soul with God. I think the apostle Paul had the right idea when he describes it as Christ “formed in” us (Gal 4:19).

Mary knew that. Her life with Jesus was more important than her life of service. Does this minimize the importance of Christian action? Hardly. But it rivets our attention on the fact that the outward journey is rooted in and sustained by the inward journey.

Notice that Jesus didn’t blame or condemn Martha for being concerned about household chores. He was only asking her to set priorities. He would much rather have a simple meal with her company than a lavish feast and see little of her.

It is very possible for what we regard as our service to Christ to degenerate into mere busy work – what I often refer to as “church work as opposed to the work of the church” – and no longer be filled with devotion to God.

Our life in Christ is the basis for our life in the world. It’s more than having devotions. It’s not about “checking in” with God occasionally. It is a matter of moment-by-moment living our lives out of who we are in Christ. That’s the essence of the Christian life.

Let me close by sharing with you a somewhat altered version of the beloved 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that is relevant to today’s message:

*The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest. It makes me lie down only when exhausted.*

*It leads me into deep depression. It hounds my soul.*

*It leads me in circles of frenzy, for activities sake.*

*Even though I run frantically from task to task, I will never get it all done, for my ideal is with me.*

*Deadlines and my need for approval, they drive me. They demand performance from me, beyond the limits of my schedule.*

*They anoint my head with migraines, My in-basket overflows. Surely fatigue and time pressures shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration forever.*

I know which version of that Psalm I prefer!

Martha, Martha, there's only one thing necessary, Jesus said. I'll live in you if you'll live in me.

That is the measure of a Christian.