

What is Busy Work?  
July 21, 2019  
[Scripture Focus: Luke 10: 38 - 42]

Today, we're going to look at the story of Mary and Martha. We'll pay special attention to what happens when Martha is super busy and Mary's just casually talking to Jesus. Is Martha just doing busy work? Who's really doing something that's important?

**SCRIPTURE**

Let's take a closer look at the Luke text that Rich read earlier. We'll listen for God's Word again.

This morning, I'll be reading from the CEB (Common English Bible)...

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal.

So Martha came to him (Jesus) and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me." The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her." Any of that scenario sound familiar to you?

Today, most of us wear our busy-ness like a badge of honor. If we're busy, we're valuable; we're important; what we're doing must be making a difference. But truth be told, we're often just busy making ourselves look busy. Honestly, when was the last time that you asked anyone (of any age) what they've been up to and heard them say anything other than "I have been so busy." News flash: Everyone's busy (or so we say).

I love my father-in-law. He moved into a house that's located a block from our house a year or so ago. He comes over for dinner a few times every week. My first question when he comes in is always "Grandpa, what have you been up to?" His answer is ALWAYS, "I've been really busy." This forces me to then ask the question "What have you been busy doing?" His answer is usually "paperwork." When I dig deeper I find that he's been doing stuff like printing out bank statements - you know the ones that we can go online to see 24/7/365 on our phone, tablet or computer.

My next question is usually “How did you have the time to do this when you worked - before you retired?” My question is really “How did you manage to do all of this paperwork when you worked 40 hours a week?” Of course, he didn’t. His required activities have expanded to fill his available time. This situation doesn’t only describe my father-in-law. It describes most of us. How could our lives begin to be of value, if weren’t so darned busy? Ask Mary and Martha...

When I was at First Pres Norfolk, a very wise elder named Dick Roberts was a member of the session. Dick was from Boston and had this great Yankee accent that made everything that he said sound pretty profound.

Once (after we had a major crisis in the church brought on by a congregational gossip fest) he said to me “Billy, (you know) nature abhors a vacuum.” What he meant was if there was no “real” information, folks would make up their own.

So, if the pastor didn’t say something about this crisis, folks will begin to imagine that maybe the pastor thinks that what happened is ok or maybe he thinks it horrible - but when there’s no official position available for the public, the public will always inadvertently insert what they think the pastor thinks.

I think that the same things happens to our time. When we have a break in the action (a time without an official responsibility), some of us will fill the empty time slot with something that may (or may not) be busy work. After all, if we don’t have anything to do, we must not be of value. Better make up something to do quickly. Jesus is coming - look busy!

It’s possible that in today’s scripture, Martha was doing that same thing. If Jesus came to your place for a visit, would you want to sit down and enjoy some iced tea and conversation with him or would you fill your time with busy work - so that Jesus would think that you’re of value? Jesus is coming - look busy...

**SO WHAT?**

Some of you may be wondering, what is *busy work* any how? When I was growing up, I don’t think that I ever heard anyone use the term *busy work*. The dictionary defines busy work as work that keeps a person busy but has little value in itself.

So, when Jesus comes back as we're told that he'll do in Matthew 25, will he find us busy doing His will or our will?

To me, this is the real question. If we're busy doing what Jesus tells us to do, it's fine. If we're busy doing what we want to do, there's a strong possibility that we may just be doing busy work. We'll be busy filling our time with activities that make us look busy but have no value.

Wouldn't it be great if we knew exactly what God wanted us to do all of the time?

Some of us might say "yeah" until we find out that God may want us to sell everything we own and move to a place to help poor people where there's no TV or indoor plumbing. Honestly, most of us prefer to do what we want to do - not what God wants us to do.

We may have talking points that make it sound like we always want to do what God wants us to do but the reality is that most of us want to do what we want to do. If what we want to do matches what God wants us to do, everybody's happy, happy, happy! But if we want to do something that doesn't match what God calls us to do... Sorry, God.

What's your favorite Bible verse? If you were to ask me, I always answer "Micah 6: 8." Micah is a prophet who announces that God is about to reduce Samaria to a heap of ruins for it's transgressions and the failure of it's people to repent. According to my study Bible, this text is where Micah says all God really wants from you is that you'd "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God" and frankly, you can't even do that... Maybe I like this verse so much because anyone should be able to "do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God." Unless God's only mandates were to eat ice cream and take lots of naps, it doesn't get much better than "doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God."

But there's this reality that we all have free will. I talked about that a few weeks ago. While we often say things like "My sister made me go to the movies with her," the reality is that we made the decision to go to the movies. Our sister didn't kidnap us at gunpoint and really make us go to the movies.

Unless God has another plan, we're large and in charge! We get to decide what to do much of the time. We get to decide whether we're going to do something of value or fill our time with busy work.

Well, back to busy work... Nobody does busy work better than churches (notice that I said "churches" & not Providence). In an environment where we all acknowledge that we are saved by grace (and not by works), churches are really good at staying busy (often by doing busy work). There's an understanding that whatever you're doing at the church is for the Lord. It's a good thing. Theoretically, this could be true. However, it could also be false.

One place where I've always seen churches excel in busy work is when they conduct their annual Time & Talent survey. I don't think that I've seen us do one at Providence but my guess is that at some time in the past, the church has participated in one.

When I was at Second Pres Norfolk, we did one every year. We'd ask for volunteers to help with landscaping knowing that we had a landscaping contract that covered everything outside of the church. So, folks would take their time, fill out the Time & Talent Survey and the surveys would end up in a desk drawer, never to see the light of day.

## **NOW WHAT?**

So, what's the take-a-way from today's message? It is really easy to experience a sense of value by being busy (even if it's busy-ness caused by busy work). Not that I'm lazy but I do really appreciate and value time to rest or talk. If you'd ever been with me on a church retreat, you'd know that this is true! Don't punish yourself when you have some free time. Instead, embrace it; do something of value; don't just lie down on the sofa and devour a bag of salt & vinegar chips!

When you end up with some "free time," seriously consider what you're going to do with it and why you're going to do it. If you think that it would make your wife happy for her to see you working in the yard, don't just go out back, sit down and dig a hole. Instead, if you really want to make her happy, ask her what you can do to be helpful. Then, do that.

**As I mentioned earlier, busy-work is the foundation for churches in America. Please notice that I didn't say at Providence! However, a year or so ago, our session was challenged to examine every mission and ministry opportunity and to recommend keeping it as is, killing it (because it's no longer needed) or improving it (because at one time, it was important but today it no longer helps accomplish the church's mission or ministry goals). To make a long story short, (when thinking about continuing a long standing mission or ministry), ask yourself why you're going to do it. If your only answer is "we've always done it." Then, STOP and determine whether there's a way to update the mission or ministry, making it more relevant to today's church!**

**Bottom line? It's easy for us to become Marthas at home, at work or at church. Martha wasn't lazy or crazy, she just went to her comfort zone when Jesus showed up. She played to the fear that Jesus was coming - look busy and got busy. Unfortunately, Jesus saw her busy-ness as a waste and decided that it was Mary who made the best use of her time.**

**Bottom line: Don't be a Martha! Be a Mary instead.**