

"ANXIOUS ABOUT MANY THINGS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 25, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

People differ which helps to make life interesting and exciting. I know of some people who can focus on only one thing at a time. I know of others who are not happy unless they have a half dozen different projects going on at the same time. I also know of some people who are so focussed that it's downright scary. I don't know where you fit into this...but I got a kick out of something that I read about an Army - Oklahoma football game and the intensity of the coach.

Jim Tatum, the Oklahoma coach, was pacing the sidelines frantically as he saw his Sooners losing to the visiting Army team by a score of 21 - 7. Nearby sat his punter, Charlie Sarratt, his sprained ankle submerged in a bucket of ice water. The game's intensity...the shouting and the screaming...caused the coach's throat to become dry, horse. He couldn't be heard. At some point in the final quarter Coach Tatum reached down, took Sarratt's foot out of the ice water, took a swig of water from the pail that Sarratt's foot had been in and then gently replaced the foot in the pail and resumed his pacing and his shouting without ever looking away from the playing field. Concentration is what we call that. I don't know who won the game...but that's not important.

DEVELOPMENT

But some people are like that. Focussed. Utterly focussed. Others tend to scatter their energies in different directions. Yes, people are different...even within the same family. Take Mary and Martha for instance. Sisters...you know the story. Different as day and night.

Perhaps you'll remember that Martha was the "doer". She was the mother "hen"...wiping her hands on her apron and brushing the hair back out of her eyes...hurrying about to make sure that everyone has been taken care of. And then, of course, there's Mary....more phlegmatic. A dreamer more than a doer. And while Martha is hurrying about getting the house all in order, Mary is positioning herself at the feet of this guest rabbi and listening to what He is saying. She's never met anyone like Jesus before. Oh...what wisdom...what power...what personal magnetism. Mary is being swept off her feet.

And Martha is getting annoyed. Why it seems that all of her life she has been "doing" while sister, Mary, has been "dreaming". She's more than annoyed. She's seething and burning. Why can't Mary do her share. There's much to be done....vegetables to be chopped. Fruit to be washed. Table to be set. And finally, she just can't hold it any longer and blurts out,

"Lord.....do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Please...tell her to come in and help me."

I think Jesus loved and admired both of these women. He probably had a warm, understanding smile on His face as He replied,

"Martha...Martha...you are anxious and troubled about many things. One thing is needful. Mary has taken the good portion which shall not be taken from her."

Let's linger for a few minutes here this morning with these words of Jesus because they contain some wise counsel for us as well as for Martha. Hear them again:

A WORD FOR OUR TIME

"You are anxious and troubled about many things...one thing is needful".

Here's a beautiful metaphor for our world. Magnavox has dramatically increased the number of "picture in picture" television sets they have been building. For the uninitiated, these "picture in picture" televisions enable viewers to watch two shows on one screen at the same time. And when used in conjunction with a video-cassette recorder's tuner, the viewer can watch two live programs simultaneously or one live and one taped.

The second program appears in an inset box located in the corner of the television screen. I'm told that 75% of television viewers already view two shows at the same time by flipping back and forth between channels using remote controls. Magnavox has a name for this; it's called "grazing". It's also called "channel surfacing". Now I suppose that by skillfully flipping the remote while watching his "picture-in-picture" TV that Dad can actually watch four shows at a time. Once upon a time, not too long ago, a family would be content to gather around the TV and watch one program for sometimes up to two hours. Think of it!

We're a restless people...obsessed with many things. We're anxious about many things. We've even coined a term to describe our condition of restlessness and anxiety. We call it STRESS. Thanks to a young researcher named Hans Selye, we have that word. This young researcher would often drop his lab rats and chase them around the laboratory and trap them beneath a sink. And then when they developed ulcers and shrunken immune tissues, he did some tests and realized what was happening. His chasing them and his clumsiness in handling them was making them sick. And searching for a word to describe this entire response to life under tension, he borrowed a term from the world of engineering, the word STRESS.

Stress may be killing more of us than AIDS. About 25 million Americans are thought to have hypertension, although half of this number don't even know they have it. Stress has a lot to do with respiratory infections, with arthritis, with colitis, with asthma, with ~~un~~ even heart rhythms, with many sexual problems and circulatory problems and yes - even cancer. We're being told that 75 to 90 percent of all reported diseases are due in part to stress. And the three best-selling drugs in America are Valium for relaxation, Inderal for high-blood pressure and Tagamet for ulcers. Leaders in industry estimate that 50 to 75 billion dollars are lost each year due to stress - related symptoms.

Stress takes a heavy toll on us.

And even if our health is not at risk, certainly our peace of mind is. We are a bit like that couple who had their home broken into. The husband heard a noise in the middle of the night. He quickly went downstairs to investigate and found a burglar emptying the silver chest. He said to the man,

"Stay right here where you are...please. I want to get my wife. She has been expecting you for twenty-five years!"

We are anxious and troubled about so many things. But listen carefully, if you will, to that important word from Jesus.

"One thing is needful...."

GET YOUR PRIORITIES IN ORDER

are in order.

This leads us to the secret of a successful, well-ordered life. Make sure your priorities

Let me elaborate. I think I can save you some money on your next time-management seminar. Make sure your priorities are in order. I believe I can help you sleep better at night. Make sure your priorities are in order. I know I can save you a few trips to the doctor. Make certain your priorities are in order. This is the KEY to working SMART as well as working hard. Make sure your priorities are in order. What are those things in your life that are really vital. Take care of those FIRST, then if the rest gets done - fine! But it's no big deal.

A number of years ago an Eastern Airlines jumbo jet crashed in the Everglades of Florida. Flight 401 was bound from New York to Miami with a full load of holiday passengers. As the plane approached Miami Airport for landing, the light that indicates proper deployment of the landing gear failed to light. The plane flew in a large, looping circle over the swamps of the Everglades while the crew members checked to see if the gear actually had not deployed, or if instead the bulb in the signal light was defective. When the flight engineer tried to remove the light bulb, it wouldn't budge. The other members of the cockpit crew tried to help him. And as they struggled with the bulb, no one noticed that the airplane was losing altitude and the plane simply flew right into the swamp. Many were killed in that crash. In other words, while an experienced crew of high-priced pilots fiddled with a seventy-five cent light bulb, the plane with its passengers flew right into the ground.

This sort of thing does happen from time to time. In business. In the home. It happens in our daily lives. We're fiddling and we crash. We lose sight of what really matters.

You see Martha wanted to be the perfect hostess and that is all "well and good", but the Master was in her home. He had only a short time to spend there. Martha had the opportunity to soak up some words of wisdom that would enrich her life immeasurably. Certainly the needs of her guests were important, but this was not the time for that. How foolish we can be when we do not keep life in its proper perspective.

A mountain guide by the name of Michael Zanger was leading some men up a mountain in the Rockies. There was one man on that climb who was having a very difficult time breathing. His coloring was poor, unusual. Frequent stops for rest didn't seem to help. As they continued to climb, his breathing became even more difficult and soon he was coughing and spitting blood. And then to make matters worse, a sudden snowstorm confined them to some hastily erected tents. The guide was concerned that the man might die from heart failure and so they put through a call for help. The man showed little interest...all he asked the guide, Michael Zanger, was to make a personal call for him. The guide thought to himself, he wants me to call his loved ones..one last time. He agreed to make the call and the man who was suffering and in danger of losing his life, said:

"Please call my stock broker in San Francisco and ask him what the value of my stock is as of today....."

That actually happened.

TAKE TIME OUT EACH DAY FOR THE WORD OF THE MASTER

The absurdity of what was important to that

man became something of a joke on future climbs the guide conducted.

So, my friend, if you are anxious about many things, it may be that your priorities are out of order which leads us on to the final and in many ways the most important thing to be said in this regard. There is one priority that will help to make the others easier. Learn to spend a bit of time each day with the Master, with His teachings. — Learn from Mary's example. — Take time to sit at the feet of Jesus. Read daily from His Word and learn to sort out your priorities with Him at your side. Particularly when life gets hard and it does, time spent with Him is essential.

Norman Vincent Peale once wrote of a visit he made to Belgium after World War III. He went to a place called Breendonk. Breendonk, during the war, had been a notorious prison in which the Nazis had incarcerated loyal, patriotic Belgians who had resisted the Nazi invaders. The Nazis had treated the Belgians like animals, keeping them in miserable little cells, torturing them and trying to crush their spirits. But the prisoners kept up their courage even when times were the most difficult. After having walked through one of the dark and dismal passageways of this former prison, Peale asked his guide,

"How could they stand it? How could they ever stand up under the terrible stress of trying to survive in this horrible place?"

The guide told Peale to follow him and he would show him how they managed to survive. Taking Peale back into one of the darkest cells of the prison, he showed Peale a crude outline of a man's face that had been carefully carved on the stone wall of the cell. It was someone's representation of the face of Jesus. Said the guide to Dr. Peale,

"When things were the hardest and our people were about to give up because they thought they could stand it no more, they would come in here...and they would put their hands on the face of Jesus to remind themselves they were not alone."

The guide went on to tell Dr. Peale that one night the Nazis came and took away the father - his own father - the father of the guide who was showing him through. The guide never saw his father again. He learned after the war that he had been imprisoned at Breendonk and, although they were not absolutely sure, they felt that he had probably died there. Then he said to Peale:

"My father was a devout Christian. We were told that often he came here to place his hand over the face of Jesus...."

These people knew where to turn to make their lives bearable. And so, too, did Mary. She positioned herself so that she could look into the face of Jesus and wise people of every age and generation since have done the same!

You and I are anxious about so many things. We need to get our priorities in order. Then, we would do well to take a few minutes each day to position ourselves at the feet of Jesus...and learn from Him...and take strength away from that time at His feet.

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence here in this church this hour....Grant us a vision of the "eternal reach" of time. And give us - amidst the confusion and clamor of each day's demands, the calmness of the everlasting hills.

Remind us that there is more to life than increasing its speed. Ease the pounding of our hearts by the quieting of our minds...that we may restore our sense of what is truly important in life. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we now pray. Amen.

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