

“Must be Present to Win” March 29, 2009

The Bible passage we have for this morning strikes more closely to home that I'd like to admit. It's the story of two sisters who welcome Jesus into their home. The story as Luke, the physician and the non-Jewish Gospel writer, tells it is this:

“As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later she stepped in, interrupting them: “Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand.”

There are many layers in this story, and any one of them would be worthy of our exploration, but the part I want to focus on is the difference between the actions of the two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha was trying to be the perfect host, making sure all the meal preparations were complete so the dining experience would be a good one. Instead of helping her, Mary plopped herself down at the feet of Jesus and listened to what he had to say—probably sharing the events of the day, maybe a story or two that had some point to make...but whatever it was, Mary just was there, sitting near him.

It's apparent that Martha finally hit her point, and complained to Jesus that Mary was not helping. It was then that Jesus said to her, **Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it, and it won't be taken from her.”**

I'm sure there are numerous ways to understand what Jesus was saying, but I think one of those ways is that it's about relationships mattering more than the perfect meal, or the well-kept home, and that's a lesson I have to constantly try to learn. I think Jesus wants us to know that it's a better use of our time to focus our attention on the person we're with, rather than occupying our time being busy with details.

That was a lesson I keep trying to learn, and it was especially important when our daughter was growing up. She would probably never have won an award for neatness, and I on the other hand, sometimes have this compulsion to keep things straight and orderly at home. Instead of harping at her all the time to clean up her room, someone wiser than I advised me to just close the door to her room, allowing her keep it the way she wanted it. Then except for board of health issues, I wouldn't have to look at it. It wasn't a perfect solution for either of us, but it certainly removed some of the stress from our relationship. So part of what Jesus was saying might fall into that category: relationships are the most

important thing, and need our time and attention in order to grow and deepen.

But there's something else going on in this story, too. Jesus, it seems, just wanted to be there—not with any agenda in mind, not with the intention to enjoy a gourmet meal, but just to be with his friends. Some scholars believe that this visit took place as Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, and he was probably pretty certain he would encounter some resistance and challenges once he arrived there. Bethany, where the sisters lived, is just outside Jerusalem, so maybe he just wanted to be there, to be quiet for a while. Mary seemed to “get it.” We don't have any recorded conversation, so it's probably safe to say that she just quietly sat there with him. She offered him the gift of her presence, not knowing exactly what was going on, but willing to just be there with him.

That was certainly something Jesus modeled in the course of his life. There are many stories of the people who caught his attention, and he went to be at their side; he was known for looking deeply in their eyes, and in that way, beginning to understand their hurt and pain. He had the gift of being able to be in the moment, to be fully focused on the person he was with. He knew the importance of just being there, even if he didn't do or say anything; his presence was enough, more than enough.

It seems to me that that is a gift you and I could offer, too. We seem to have lost the ability to just be there and be attentive to what the other person is saying or doing. I guess that's because we're either on our phones, on the Internet, watching TV, or thinking about what we're going to say or do next. Seldom are we content to just be there—not saying or doing anything, just focusing on the moment at hand, and the persons with whom we are surrounded.

This really came home to me a week or two ago. I was in Houston with my group of pastors from around the country, the group we call the Mavericks. We hadn't been together for almost five months, which was a long time for us, and there was a lot of catching up to do before we could even start into our meeting agenda. As one after the other shared, I looked around the room and saw an interesting sight. Every one of us had our laptops open checking email, or we were messing with our phones for text messages or missed calls; no one was making eye contact with the speaker. And while there were enough comments that showed we were sort of listening to one another, to the casual observer that was not at all evident. Not one of us was able to turn off our phones, shut down our computers, and just be there, listening to our friends. We failed at offering the best gift we could have offered one another.

Those of us who are parents sometimes do the very same thing with our kids. They want to tell us something—a story about their day at school, or something that happened with one of their friends, and we say, “Wait a minute until I'm through,” or “I can't right now; I'm busy.”

In fact, I was just talking to a mother of a seven-year-old the other day, and she said that on her way to

work, she was replaying an incident just like the one I described a second ago. Her daughter wanted to tell her something she thought important, but her mother was busy getting ready to go to work, and just didn't seem to have time to listen. The mother's comment was, "I guess that's why grandparents are so important. When my daughter does that with my mother, she drops everything and focuses on her granddaughter. I need to learn to do that." she said, and so do most of us.

You see, what we're talking about is being fully present, staying in the moment and being engaged with the person who's with us. It's not worrying about how we're coming across, what we're going to do next, or what we have forgotten to do. Just being there means that we take everything that's going on in our heads, and set it all aside for a moment, and we concentrate on the person or the matter at hand.

When we're fully present, we do a lot more listening and a lot less talking. Listening may be the best gift we can ever bestow on our life partner, our friend, an elderly neighbor, a small child. It's a welcome gift to someone who's grieving, or who is going through a rough time. It's not about giving advice, or trying to fix the situation. It's about listening, being there, caring, and it is a gift of love that we can all give.

The reality is that when we listen intently, when we focus fully on the other person, we may experience far more than we could ever imagine. We just might experience the power of love, the gift of respect and honor, and the precious moment in which we're living.

Giving the gift of presence is like giving life, because every time we stay in the moment, fully engaged, we give life to another.

That means we have the ability to bring aliveness to each other and every experience. Those moments are holy moments, when we are just willing to be there, listening, loving, caring. The times when we offer our presence can reassure those who feel as though they're drowning in heartache and pain; it can comfort those who grieve—even without saying a word.

In many ways, it's like a story that appeared in a recent St. Vince Hospice newsletter. It was a story that came from the *San Francisco Chronicle* about a female humpback whale who had gotten tangled up in crab traps and lines just outside the Golden Gate Bridge. She was weighed down by hundreds of pounds of traps that were causing her to struggle just to stay afloat. She had hundreds of yards of rope wrapped around her body, her tail, her torso, and a line tugging in her mouth.

A fisherman happened to spot her, and realizing her dilemma, radioed an environmental group for help. When the rescue team arrived, it was determined that she was in such a bad way that the only way to save her was to undertake the dangerous effort of diving in and untangling her. Even one slap of her tail could kill a rescuer.

They worked for hours, and eventually freed her. The divers said that once she was freed, she swam around in what seemed like joyous circles, and then she came back to each of every diver, one at a time, and nudged them. That was her way of thanking them; the

divers said that it was the most incredibly beautiful experience of their lives. The one who cut the rope out of her mouth said her eye was following him the whole time, and that, because of that experience of being with that whale, he will never be the same. They connected in that way because the two of them were there together, entangled in the moment, intertwined in some mysterious way.

That's the kind of love that's experienced when we are willing to just be there. Our gift of presence is a precious gift, and it says we care. Just the presence of another person can fill us with hope, joy and peace. May we be fortunate enough to offer the gift of presence to those who need it, and to embrace the blessing of those who are willing to be there for us.

CLOSING:

Someone named Len Wein has said, "**A true friend is someone who is there for you when he'd rather be anywhere else.**" We all need, and each of us can be, the person who's there, when it would easier, more convenient to be anywhere else. But those who are willing to just be there for others are there through thick and thin, good and bad, times of joy and times of sorrow. They are the ones who are there when there are no words to say, nothing to do, but just be there.

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray we are willing to offer the gift of presence to those who need it.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

