

“Slow Down, There”
(Matthew 6:25-33)

11/24/24
Rev. James Koyama

This morning’s Gospel reading is a good choice for Thanksgiving and for the holiday season in general. Because it reminds us, as we always need reminding, of the importance of pausing in the midst of our labors long enough to experience the wealth of blessings God has bestowed on us.

Sometimes we need to just stop and smell the roses or observe the “lilies of the field” or the birds, and how God clothes and feeds them, in spite of the fact that they lack most of the abilities we have to harness creation to our own purposes. Sometimes we need to strive less and just stop to look and listen and experience how God is doing the same for us.

A Thanksgiving – like Household

Another Gospel story illustrates this for us. Martha and Mary, two women in the same household are reacting differently to a visit from Jesus. Martha has been busily putting everything in order and preparing to receive Jesus as a guest. She is much like the cook in many households this week, preparing for Thanksgiving Dinner. She is so

preoccupied with her preparations that she is still carrying them out, even after her guest has arrived.

She knows she is running behind and in a show of frustration, she goes to Jesus and asks him to tell Mary, who is just sitting down to a conversation with him, to get off her “you know what” and come help her out in the kitchen. Martha is in that head space that many of us have a tendency to get into; where she feels duty bound to do all the things that will be necessary to make the get-together a success.

The table still needs to be set with the checkered napkins and with great-grandmother’s porcelain gravy boat in its place of honor in the middle of the table. This is tradition! The turkey needs another basting, the cake still needs to be frosted. The guest has arriving and Martha can see that she needs to shift gears a little; to pause and make herself available, with maybe a little small talk and a hug.

But pulling off this kind of work is like a runaway train, especially when we are talking about a Thanksgiving gathering. It is a like a moving work of art. Everything has to come out of the oven at the right time and no one can be left tooling around without a drink in hand or a bowl of nuts or Chex mix close by.

It doesn't take much for things to start going off the tracks, like the sped up assembly line scene in "I love Lucy", where all the chocolates start going over the edge before Lucy and Ethel they can wrap them. In other words, trying to make yourself available can be stressful, when you are trying to do that on top of making sure everything goes according to plan.

The story of Martha and Mary seems like a pretty simple and straightforward story; a story with a message that should be easy to take to heart and follow. "Stop what you are doing and come sit down and join our conversation", Jesus tells Martha. "Connect with us, because connecting and catching up with each other is the 'why' behind our getting together in the first place."

But when you apply Jesus's request to a situation like Thanksgiving dinner with guests, it's not so easy to just stop and be available. And in a way Martha starts to look pretty good. After all, our Thanksgiving Martha's are doing their guests a great service.

Thanksgiving is a powerful tradition that reaches into our shared past and draws us together into community in a spirit of love and gratitude; in celebration of our blessings. And without people like Martha, to keep the time-honored recipes, and put into action the detailed

knowledge of when and how to cook and serve each dish; without the added details like serving the gravy from Grandma's gravy boat, the whole thing loses meaning. Without their attention to detail, it ceases to be a sacred ritual that unites the past with the present and the future.

So I think that even though Jesus rightly puts relationship building over preparation, I think we need to think of this, not as a put down of Martha's busyness, but as a reminder of the importance of being able to set aside our duties in order to make ourselves available.

Jesus is following the Old Testament tradition that tells us to honor the Sabbath, by intentionally letting go of whatever "work" we are doing in order to make ourselves available to God and to whatever conversation with God and with each other that God wants to engage us in.

It's a tough message for we who have been raised in a culture obsessed with time management and with setting and achieving goals. We tend to think of time set aside to be "available" as time wasted.

But then, how can anyone really be in relationship with God or with anyone else and how can we even know what our goals should be,

unless we are able to set aside what is going on in our own heads and be agenda-less in order to really hear what is going on around us ?

One-Way Prayer

Often when we think of prayer, we think of it as involving both talking to and listening to God, like two ends of a phone call going back and forth. And what I think often happens is that our relationship with God becomes like a one-way phone call, where we are basically talking to God without listening and reinforcing what he has already told us, as though we have nothing left to hear from the other end.

In our Sunday School days, we prayed with a listening attitude. We prayed this way because, as children, we knew that there was so much that we didn't understand and we wanted very much to understand. We wanted to be "in the know," to be "insiders." But more than this we genuinely wanted God to tell us what was worth living for. And as we matured, we received answers that we felt we could live by.

But once we felt that we understood what God had been trying to say to us, we stopped listening and got to work implementing what we had learned. Our prayers shifted from the needy listening prayers of an outsider to the confident prayers of an insider, who presumes to already know God's will and no longer needs to listen quite as carefully; as

though God has nothing further to add. At least I have seen this in myself.

But the reality is that, no matter how good we imagine our grasp of truth to be, the humbling reality is that God always has much more to teach us, if we are willing to keep listening, really listening. Because there is such a thing as listening that isn't really listening.

Really listening requires being available, and being available means giving in to "agenda-less time", because you can't give your full attention to anything, if the soundtrack of your to-do list is running in the back of your mind while you are trying to listen and you are only waiting to get back to what you were doing.

I have also heard it said that there are only two kinds of prayer. Please and Thank you. Please is the request for help and guidance. And thank you is our gratitude for God's response. But for those of us who are too busy with our to-do lists and focused on what we can do for others, the question is, when have we stopped and listened long enough to be able to really appreciate what our "still speaking" God is doing for us?

Should we say “Thank you for everything I did to make Thanksgiving happen?” or “Thank you for all the work I did to bring in the harvest?” That is not a thank you prayer. That is a “thank me” prayer.

All in all, the message for today is this. In this time of busyness and full to-do lists, remember that there will be important moments when God wants us to turn off that to-do list soundtrack that is running in our heads and just listen “agenda-less,” so that God can share with us the gifts that inspire our heartfelt gratitude.