

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

July 17, 2022 – PENTECOST 6C / PROPER 11, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Busy Signal*”*

Genesis 18:1-10a (The Lord promises a son to Abraham and Sarah)
Psalm 15 (Only those who do right shall dwell with God)
Colossians 1:15-28 (Christ—the image of the invisible God—is in us, and is our hope of glory)
St. Luke 10:38-42 (Jesus takes priority over our busyness)

Satan called a worldwide convention of demons, where, in his opening address he announced: “We can’t keep Christians from going to church. We can’t keep them from reading their Bibles and knowing the truth. We can’t even keep them from forming an intimate relationship with their Savior. Once they gain that connection with Jesus, our power over them is broken.

“So let them go to their churches; let them have their potluck dinners. But steal the rest of their moments, so they won’t have time to get close to Jesus. This is what I want you to do,” commanded the Devil: “Distract them from connecting with their Lord and maintaining that vital connection throughout the day!”

“How shall we do this?” the demons shouted.

“Keep them busy with the nonessentials of life. Invent innumerable schemes to occupy their minds,” Satan answered. “Tempt them to spend, spend, spend, and worry, worry, worry.”

“Persuade wives to toil long hours and husbands to work 6 to 7 days a week, so they can afford their empty lifestyles. Keep them from spending quality time with their children, so that as their families fragment, their homes will offer no escape from the pressures of work!

“Overstimulate their minds so they cannot hear the Still Small Voice. Entice them to listen to SiriusXM or their MP3 players whenever they drive. Keep their Alexa, Spotify, Nintendo, and Xbox going constantly at home. See to it that every store and restaurant plays secular music nonstop. This will jam their minds and impede their intimacy with Christ.

“Pound their minds with trashy news, 24 hours a day. Cause them to lose hours surfing the Internet. Make them addicted to Facebook and Twitter. Flood their mailboxes with tempting catalogs and every kind of solicitation and promotion offering junk products and false hopes.

“Keep anorexic, airbrushed, cosmetically enhanced models and actresses in all the media, so husbands will yearn for outward beauty, becoming dissatisfied with their wives. And keep wives too tired to meet their husbands’ needs. When their spouses begin looking elsewhere, that will fragment their families even further!

“Even in their recreation, let them be excessive. Keep them too wound-up about amusement parks and sports events to spend quiet times in nature, reflecting on God's creation. Keep them busy, busy, *busy!* Then, have families return from their fun exhausted and cranky.

“Give the children Santa Claus to distract them from the true meaning of Christmas, and the Easter Bunny, so they won't talk about Jesus’ resurrection and His power over sin and death.

“And when church members meet for spiritual fellowship, involve them in gossip and small talk. Pump up their attitudes of self-righteousness and keep them from a guilty conscience. Cause friction between them and their fellow parishioners. Have them spread malicious rumors, yet still claim to be Christians, so that sinners view them as hypocrites.”

“Finally, crowd the Christians’ lives with so many worldly ‘good causes,’ they have no time to seek answers from Jesus.”

“What a plan!” cried the evil spirits. “This will definitely work!”

Eagerly, they went about their assignments, causing Christians everywhere to become busier, more rushed, and distracted. Increasingly anxious and harried, believers had less and less time for God or their families. Moreover, they had no energy at all for telling others about the power of Christ to change lives. The demons were thrilled to be able to spell “busy,” B-U-S-Y: *B*-eing *U*-nder *S*-atan's *Y*-oke.¹

When God is calling *you*, does He constantly get a busy signal? I'm sure all of you are familiar with how irritating it is, when you really need to get through to someone you love, and can't. Imagine how *God* feels!

In our Gospel today, we hear about Martha, one *very* busy lady. Most preachers write her off as the sister who's too busy to be focused on Jesus. But notice that Jesus arrives at Martha's home with *twelve* disciples and numerous other hangers-on. Martha would have had to feed upwards of 20 people. *No wonder* she's angry that Mary isn't helping her in the kitchen! She's performing a valuable service for the Lord and His followers. But is her hospitality somehow inferior to what Mary is doing—studying intently at Jesus' feet?

If we examine this story closely, we find that both sisters are somewhat unconventional for their time. Let's look at Martha first. She appears to be the head of her household. For a Jewish woman of the first century, this could be a sign of personal tragedy. Either she is a widow or has never married. Perhaps her brother, Lazarus, was chronically ill or an invalid—after all, he dies in the 11th chapter of John's gospel. In any case, as a single woman, Martha had no social status, a circumstance generally viewed as a sign of God's displeasure. Such women were expected to be as invisible as possible. Yet here was Martha, boldly taking on the leadership of this home.

And then there is Mary. Her choice pulled at the very fabric of that society! In two first-century writings, the rabbis had declared: “It is better to burn the Torah than to teach it to a woman.” And, “It is better to teach a daughter to be a prostitute than to teach her the Torah.” For a woman to listen to Jesus teach about the Holy Scriptures was viewed as just plain *wrong!*²

But Mary had discovered in Christ the same power, the same attraction that Martha, and their brother Lazarus, had found. So Mary sat at Jesus' feet—the position a disciple normally assumed—to listen and to learn. Such a bold and reckless act was unthinkable! It struck at convention, ignored propriety, and was downright scandalous. Even so, Mary saw a spiritual opportunity of great value and reached for it, ignoring every obstacle.

Both Mary and Martha are interesting, gutsy women who were very much alike, and who were willing to risk a great deal for the opportunity to be with Jesus. Perhaps this puts a fresh light on the historic spat between them.³ The original Greek for what Jesus says to Martha is something like, “few things are needed—or only one.” In this regard, one Bible commentator has suggested that Jesus is talking about the dishes Martha is preparing—they don't need that many! Martha had planned too lavish a banquet.⁴ When Jesus says that Mary has chosen “the good,” that word in Greek has multiple meanings, including “kind,” or “suitable.”

It would seem that Jesus isn't putting down Martha's work. Rather, He is concerned about her anxiety over her hostessing—how worried and distracted she is, overdoing it with this unnecessarily elaborate meal. Any of you women ever been there, done that? Our Lord is also saying that His permitting Mary to study with Him—a privilege accorded only to men at that time—would not be taken away from her.

Notice, Jesus does not pit the two women against each other, as we often do when we assess one another's choices: Service versus worship; the monastic versus the secular life; social activism versus personal piety; faith versus works; and so on. Both women are portrayed as welcoming and loving Jesus. Both respond to Our Lord's presence—one by working for Him, serving Him, and feeding Him and His disciples. The other, by listening to Him and learning from Him. Both sisters' responses are commendable. Both are faithful responses.⁵

The real issue here is not who does the dishes. The real issue is whether we will make time for Jesus at all, and what a relationship with Him will mean for our lives. Because the presence of our Lord changes things! Many of the old rules and patterns will no longer work. His presence may even bring inconvenience, as we find the need to reevaluate our priorities and restructure our time.⁶ But the fact is, if we are constantly sending God a busy signal, we *do* need to reorder our lives.

In today's lesson, we learn that it's OK to respond to Jesus through service and study. Either way, we are to cut back on our empty busyness, keep it simple, and *put Jesus first*. Instead of laboring over that fancy supper, take the family out for pizza, so you can spend time talking together. Make God your top priority every day, by setting aside time to pray, worship, or read the Bible. Turn off the TV, walk away from your computer, unplug your ear buds and the music you're listening to. Go out for a walk, or sit on the porch, opening yourself to the beauty of God's handiwork.

And once in awhile, it's even OK to set aside the work we do for church, in order to simply spend time in His presence, being refreshed and re-created by His Holy Spirit. So, in the coming week, I encourage those of you who are not planning to go on vacation to take some time to Stop, Look, and Listen: Be still, and know that He is God.

Let us pray:

“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.” *Amen.*⁷

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, July 2001, Wesley Grove United Methodist Church, Gaithersburg MD, and 18 July 2010, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used by permission.

¹ Story courtesy of Beulah Williamson, <beulah@bibletheology.com> 17 May 2001. Used with permission.

² Adapt. James Liggett, “Today We Hear about Mary and Martha,” 22 July 2001, [Sermons that Work](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/today-we-hear-about-mary-and-martha-proper-11-c-2001/), <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/today-we-hear-about-mary-and-martha-proper-11-c-2001/> 8 July 2022. Used with Permission.

³ Liggett, *op. cit.*

⁴ [The Interpreter's Bible](#), Vol. VIII, :The Gospel According to St. Luke” (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), p. 199.

⁵ Adapt. Richard J. Fairchild, “The Better Part,” 2001, [Spirit Networks](http://spirit-net.ca/sermons/c-or16sesu.php) <http://spirit-net.ca/sermons/c-or16sesu.php>, 8 July 2022. Used with permission.

⁶ Liggett, *op. cit.*

⁷ Collect for Proper 20, [The Book of Common Prayer](#) (1979), p. 234