

Year C, July 21, 2019
6 Pentecost (Proper 11)
Christ Church, Mexia

Charles Swindoll writes in his book, *Hand Me Another Brick*, about a California industrialist who addressed a group of executives at a leadership seminar some time ago. "His topic concerned employee motivation – how to get the job done while maintaining the enthusiasm and commitment of your personnel. He offered a lot of helpful advice, but one concept in particular has stuck in my head: 'There are two things that are most difficult to get people to do: to think and do things in the order of their importance.'"

The lessons from the gospel and the epistle this morning are about those things – thinking and priorities. They are definitely connected. Priorities allow us to focus on what is most important, but without thought, we can focus on the wrong thing or fail to change/adjust when necessary. Because that's the real problem, priorities need to change from time to time – hence the need for thought.

Let me illustrate with a couple of stories. The first is from Stephen Nordbye: "On Day Six of the ill-fated mission Apollo 13, the astronauts needed to make a critical course correction. If they failed, they might never return to Earth. To conserve power, they shut down the onboard computer that steered the craft. Yet the astronauts needed to conduct a thirty second burn of the main engines. How to steer? Astronaut Jim Lovell determined that if they could keep a fixed point in space in view through their tiny window, they could steer the craft manually. That focal point turned out to be their destination – Earth. As shown in the 1995 hit movie *Apollo 13*, for thirty-nine agonizing seconds, Lovell focused on keeping Earth in view. By not losing sight of that reference point, the three astronauts avoided disaster." Clearly focus and maintaining the priority were essential here, but let's look at another story.

In Washington, DC at a Metro Station on a cold January morning in 2007, a man with a violin played six pieces written by Bach. His performance lasted for about 45 minutes. During that time, approximately 2,000 people went through the station, most of them on their way to work. No one really noticed and no one applauded – he received no real recognition at all. Only 6 people stopped briefly to listen, and about 20 people gave a total of \$32. The man was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest musicians in the world - who two days prior

had played the same music to a sold-out theater in Boston where the seats averaged \$100 each. He played some of the most intricate music ever written on a violin valued at \$3.5 million, but hardly anyone altered their priority to recognize and appreciate this awesome beauty that was available to them. The Washington Post, who sponsored this social experiment about perception, taste and priorities, mused that if we fail to stop and listen in this instance, under these circumstances, how many other things do we miss as we rush through life?

Do you see the difference between Mary and Martha here? Martha is doing what comes naturally, taking care of the basic things to show hospitality, a real priority for their culture and time, but she is missing this visit with Jesus – what will be his last visit. Sure, she may not perceive this is his last visit, but still she is taking care of menial tasks and not focusing on the guest – Jesus. And she is distracted and frustrated. Plus, she tries to get him to make Mary feel bad for not doing the same as her. And possibly she'd like a little recognition or appreciation for her work. But as the reading from Colossians makes clear – Christ needs to be the focus.

Like Martha, don't we tend to get somewhat preoccupied with our duties in the church, so much so that we fail to attend to the visitor, for example? I know that I do sometimes. In *The Rule*, St. Benedict specifically notes for his followers, that even if they are in prayer, they must stop and greet a visitor who may come. So even though we are supposed to keep Jesus as our first priority, that may mean shifting what we are doing. In other words, there are many ways to serve/focus on Jesus – what is the most important at this moment? Regarding Mary and Martha – there is more to hospitality than providing a meal, for example. Jesus is not chastising Martha for doing what is required, but for letting it totally distract her. It isn't that she should do only what Mary is doing, but that she should not lose sight of him in her preparations.

We are all so busy – we are required to be multi-taskers it seems, and those distractions can take us away from what is most important – our relationship with God. And sometimes, we need to stop and give God our full measure of attention, and not just on Sunday morning for a few minutes – though that would be a good start. We need to make time for prayer and the reading of scripture throughout the week, otherwise we may be going through the motions at church, distracted and frustrated, and not getting what we need - some quality time with Christ, which is one of the purposes of the Eucharist. But how many

times, like the people passing Joshua Bell, do we leave the rail without having felt that most important union?

After the peace today, take time to focus on what follows, prepare to be with Christ in the receiving of the wine and bread. During the week set aside some specific times, at least a couple to begin, for prayer, scripture reading, thought/reflection and an openness to the Holy Spirit. Continue to do these things and you will be amazed at how much better your life will be.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen.