

July 18, 2010
Lectionary 16c
Luke 10:38-42
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

ATTENTION SPAN

Multi-tasking is a way of life for teens. They can be on their laptop, switching between e-mail, Facebook, a computer game, and instant messaging. At the same time they can be doing several homework assignments, all the while texting a friend, and playing a favorite song on iTunes.

Is your head swimming? Maybe it's because you're a digital immigrant like me. In a book called *iBrain: Technological Altering of the Modern Mind*, the author calls those who grew up with computers, e-mail and things like iTunes "digital natives." Those of us who came to such technological things later in life are called "digital immigrants."

iBrain suggests that the brains of digital natives are being altered through multi-tasking and the use of so many techno-skills. But with that comes deficits in social skills, listening abilities, focus, and just plain paying attention.

The spiritual question for us today is this: can you really pay attention—be truly present to someone or something—if you are distracted by a multitude of things. And that gets us to our gospel.

Jesus is a guest in the home of Martha and Mary. And we're told that Martha is worried and distracted with many things. We don't know if she is multi-tasking. We don't know if she is prone to worry or perfectionism. We don't know if she is having a bad day. We don't know what kind of sibling rivalry issues she has with Mary.

There have been too many sermons, Bible studies, and spirited conversations that have pitted Mary against Martha. Doers and servers have sided with Martha, wondering why Jesus seems harsh with her. Scholars have tried to make the point that as a woman, Mary is taking a counter-cultural posture. She is sitting at the feet of rabbi Jesus, something a woman of that time wouldn't have done. Actually, the story has been interpreted in dozens of ways, some helpful, some not, but all thought-provoking.

One thing is clear: Mary is giving her full attention to Jesus, the guest in their home. And Martha has her mind on other things, perhaps getting the meal on the table. Nothing wrong with that. Sarah is also preparing a meal in our reading from Genesis. She and Abraham welcome three strangers into their home. And in extending gracious hospitality, they encounter divine visitors. Or as we read elsewhere, they entertain angels unaware.

Jesus says that there is need of one thing and that Mary has chosen the "better part". Maybe it is an invitation for us to look at our priorities. Mary is listening, something we are not so good at. In Luke, Jesus makes that a high priority. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it.

And it's hard to listen if we're not paying attention. It's happened to nearly all of us, I would bet. We are enjoying a meal with someone. The phone rings and our partner, friend, or colleague asks: "Do you mind if I take this call?" They do. But even after they hang up they never really come back. Their mind is distracted with other things. They are not really listening or present.

There are a lot of distractions in our lives. That is why posture makes a difference. Mary sits at Jesus' feet, taking a position of listening. We too sit in this sacred space: to help us focus, slow down, pay attention. It's not that God isn't in nature, relationships, or the tasks of daily life. God is most certainly there. But we sit at Jesus' feet, eager to hear words of challenge and words of hope. We simply show up, not always knowing why we're here. We come to be reminded that through baptism we are defined not by what we do or accomplish, but by our identity as children of God.

People who meditate are committed to showing up as well. Amid the distractions and stresses of life, they assume a posture, often sitting cross-legged on the floor. Waiting and listening. Slowing down and breathing in peace.

The columnist Bob Herbert suggests that if we get out of touch with the song within us, we will end up frustrated and dissatisfied. He doesn't think we can stay in touch with our song by constantly Twittering or tweeting, thumbing out messages on BlackBerrys, or piling up virtual friends on Facebook. In what sounds like a good sermon to me, he says we need to reduce the speed limits of our lives. "We need to savor the trip. Leave the cell phone at home every once in awhile. Try kissing more and tweeting less. And stop talking so much. Other people have something to say, too. And when they don't, that glorious silence that you hear will have more to say to you than you ever imagined. That is when you will begin to hear your song. That's when your best thoughts take hold, and you become really you." (New York Times, July 16, 2010)

It's hard to pay attention. It's probably hard to pay attention to this sermon on a hot day like this. Yet it is God's grace—the loving attention God showers on us—that is the gift we most cherish on this Lord's Day. Let's sit for a moment and listen for that.