

Knowing What's Important

Michael Zanger was a mountain guide. He told of leading some men up Mount Shasta in northern California. One man was having difficulty breathing. His face coloring was unusual. Frequent stops for rest did not seem to help. As they continued to climb, his breathing was punctuated by coughing and spitting froth mixed with blood. To make matters worse, a sudden snowstorm confined them to hastily erected tents. Michael thought the man might die of heart failure.

As he lay there, Michael revealed that they could call for rescuers on his mobile phone. The man showed interest. "Would you make a personal call for me?" asked the man. Michael thought to himself, "This man thinks he is critical, and he wants to speak with his loved ones one last time." So he said, "Yes."

"Well," said the man, "would you call my broker in San Francisco and ask what the value of my stock is today?"

That happened! The absurdity of what was important to that man became a frequent joke on future climbs.

It's amazing how we can lose sight of what's important in life. We become oblivious to the things that really matter and instead focus on the things that may give us some temporary satisfaction but cannot bring true happiness.

I will never forget Barbara Bush giving a commencement address at her alma mater Smith College. She told the graduates that while career advancement as a lawyer, doctor or business professional may be important, human connections are even more important. "At the end of life," she said, "you will never regret not having passed one more test, not winning one more verdict or not closing one more deal, but you will regret the time you did not spend with your spouse, your children or your friends."

In this crazy, fast-paced world, it is so easy for us to become distracted by the less important and to ignore the most important things that make life worthwhile. Some aspects are temporary; others are eternal. There are things that will pass away and other things that will affect us profoundly in this life and the next.

In our gospel today, Mary and Martha are two good women with very different temperaments. Martha was active and impulsive, an extrovert, feeling strongly, and expressing what she felt. Mary was quiet and still, an introvert, feeling deeply, but saying less than she felt. Martha, when Jesus came to her house, rejoiced, but busied herself with details of food and entertainment. Mary also rejoiced to see Jesus, but her first thought was to sit at his feet and hear his teachings. Mary wanted to learn, but Martha wanted to do. We should not disparage Martha's efforts. Without her, all the guests would be starving with no food to eat, no wine to drink.

We need folks like Martha who cook the roast and set the table. Imagine, for example, if we did not have the volunteers in the kitchen cooking breakfast and lunch for us after our Sunday worship services. Advent would not be the same church. We would not only miss the food, but the hospitality, connections, community and conversation. We need the Marthas in our church – and in every church.

And yet, when Martha complains that Mary is not helping her, Jesus rebukes her: Martha, Martha, you are fretting and fussing about so many things; but one thing is necessary.

Jesus is asking us to step back for a moment and think about our lives, what we are doing and what we should be doing. We may be doing good things, but we can do better things. We are living life okay, but not great. We have a certain level of satisfaction, but we are not reaching our potential. In other words, we are coasting along but not excelling. And that's sad. Too often the demands of life can distract us from how we should be living.

I knew an attorney who worked for a major law firm in New York. He was obsessed to become a partner in his firm. He worked seventy, eighty and even ninety hours a week, leaving no time for anyone else including his wife and young daughter. Finally, his wife couldn't take being alone any longer and left him. When I last heard of that lawyer, he was a partner in another law firm, but he also was divorced and living alone. Each night he would come home to an empty apartment with no wife to love him, no daughter to greet him. He had money, status and a successful career, but he felt completely empty and lost. He had everything and he had nothing.

So often we deceive ourselves about what will bring us happiness. And yet, if we don't have our priorities in order, we may achieve everything we aimed for in life, but on our deathbed still feel like a failure. Christ, family, doing good in the world, showing love to others, growing in our relationship with God are the things that lead to a life of significance. The key is to focus on what is most important. And, of course, the most important thing is Jesus.

The eighteenth-century evangelist George Whitefield once recounted the inscription on the tomb of a great sculptor, which was itself designed by the sculptor. The inscription read: "What I was as an artist seemed of some importance while I lived; but what I really was, as a believer in Jesus Christ, is the only thing of importance to me now."

There are many things that may seem important to us now. We are alive, healthy, feeling great and living well. But there will come a time when we will look back on our lives and regret the things that we did not do – the time not spent with our spouse and children, the time not spent with family and friends, the love not shown, the generosity not given, the caring not practiced – all of which could have made the world a better place for the people around us.

It's been said that on our deathbed, no one thinks about how much money that could have been invested in the stock market, but they do think about the love and goodness they have shown to the people dearest to them. The things that seemed important now seem trivial, and things we once took for granted or ignored, now become precious. The temporary passes away; the eternal lasts forever.

To leave the world a better place because we have lived in it is the highest compliment one can pay to any human being. And the only way to do that is to focus on Jesus – adapting his values, following his way, and trusting him with our lives.

There is a famous story about the great Frankish king Charlemagne. When he died, instead of a normal funeral, a royal robe was put upon him, a crown of gold was placed on his head, and he was seated on his throne for all to see. A Bible was placed on his lap. The king's forefinger pointed to a particular verse in the

Bible. The verse was Matthew 16:26: “For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?”

Sadly, for some people, that lesson doesn’t become clear until they are close to their dying breath. However, the good news for us in this church is that there is still time. When, like Mary, we focus on Christ, we begin to see life as he sees it. Christ gives us perspective, orients our priorities, and shows us the way to live and to love. When Jesus is pre-eminent in our lives, everything else falls into place. We don’t miss out on life. Instead, we live it abundantly in Jesus.

I still remember that first moonwalk back in 1969, and maybe you do too. Astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first man to ever set foot on the moon, saying those famous words, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Shortly after he returned to earth, Neil Armstrong went to Israel to visit the Holy Land. He was taken on a tour of the Old City of Jerusalem by an Israeli archaeologist, Meir Ben-Dov. When they got to the Hulda Gate, which is at the top of the stairs leading to the Temple Mount, Armstrong asked Ben-Dov whether Jesus had walked in that same area. Ben-Dov replied, “Certainly, Jesus was a Jew. These are the steps leading to the Temple, so he must have walked here many times.” Armstrong then asked if these were the original steps, and Ben-Dov confirmed that they were. “I have to tell you,” Armstrong said, “I am more excited stepping on these stones than I was stepping on the moon.”¹

Neil Armstrong knew what was important in life. Jesus was his Lord and Savior; everything else was secondary. You and I worry about many things these days, but we need to be focused on what is most important in our lives. We might begin by setting aside time every day to feed on the risen Christ, through prayer, Bible reading and study. Read a Gospel passage each day and get to know Jesus personally as your Lord and Savior but also as your friend and companion. Like Mary sitting at her Lord’s feet, we need to spend time each day looking into the face of Jesus.

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1. Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012)