

**Proper 11, Year C**

7/17/2016

[Genesis 18:1-10a](#)[Psalm 15](#)[Colossians 1:15-28](#)[Luke 10:38-42](#)**Staying Focused**

If you have not yet downloaded the *Pokémon Go* app then you may be the only one. Estimates say the game has over 21 million daily active users. In one week since its release. 21 million people! Which is why you may have noticed reference to the game on our sign outside. We're not alone—churches all over the country are trying to draw a little attention themselves by becoming part of what appears to be a legitimate cultural phenomenon.

If you don't have any idea what I'm talking about, Pokémon has for years been primarily a cartoon and a trading-card game. Last week, a new app came out that allows you to catch Pokémon in the virtual world by moving around in the real world. The biggest advantage is that it's a video game that actually has people going outside and accidentally getting some exercise by walking around. The biggest problem, however, is that some people are getting hurt playing it. People have been walking out into oncoming traffic, and trespassing in dangerous places trying to catch a Pokémon. On Wednesday two men in their early 20s fell off of a cliff in California playing it. They're okay, so you can laugh if you want.<sup>1</sup> Even though the app warns you when you open it to stay alert and aware of your surroundings, people have their eyes locked on their devices rather than on where they're going. People may be walking around outside, but they're so distracted

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<sup>1</sup> Janissa Delzo, "Men Fall From Cliff Playing Pokémon Go," *CNN*, July 16, 2016, accessed July 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/15/health/pokemon-go-players-fall-down-cliff/>.

they're getting into trouble, as well as missing out on the beauty of the world around them.

Even without the *Pokémon Go* app, many of us have our heads buried in our devices today. Whether we're texting while walking down the street or checking email in the middle of dinner, technology, wonderful as it is, has become a distraction. Technology is just one of the many things that have people distracted today. We, like Martha scurrying around the house in an effort to be hospitable to Jesus, find ourselves "worried and distracted" by many things. The kids' homework. The bills. Paperwork that needs to get done before going to bed. Or the news! The 24-hour news cycle on TV and especially online gets people more worried today than I ever remember us being when I was younger. I don't think, in many ways, that the world is any worse than it was years ago—it's just that now, with instant access to limitless information, we know about every little thing that happens. So, we find ourselves worried and distracted by the state of the world, a never-ending workload, life-in-general, . . . oh, and Pokémon. It's hard to stay focused on the important things in a world filled to the brim with worries and distractions. We can't stay focused. We only pay *some* attention to the tasks or people at hand. One technologist has written that the "disease of the Internet age is 'continuous partial attention.'"<sup>2</sup>

Martha gets it. While Martha may not have had to worry about falling off of a cliff while hunting Pokémon, she's still worried and distracted by many things, and it's taken away her focus. This is a wonderful story that we've just heard, and it only appears

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<sup>2</sup> James A. Wallace, *Feasting on the Word (Kindle Edition)*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Proper 3-16)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Loc. 9704.

in the Gospel of Luke. John tells us a different story about Mary & Martha, about the time Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. That's all we know of them, though.

One of the really fascinating things about this story is the clue it offers on Jesus' feelings about the value and equality of women. If you go into our sacristy you'll see a wonderful stained glass window of the story, and it looks perfectly harmless. But, this is a scandal. Jesus violates some pretty standard Jewish norms by being "alone with women who are not his relatives"; by allowing a woman to wait on him and serve him, which would have been considered highly inappropriate; and by *teaching* a woman—in her own house, no less!<sup>3</sup> Jesus has an annoying habit of hanging out with and making disciples of all kinds of people we don't want him to: women, foreigners, minorities, people of other religions, lepers, and all kinds of generally undesirable or sinful folks. When we will get used to the fact that Jesus was a pretty scandalous guy?

But I digress. Let's not get distracted. The real point of the story is Martha losing her focus on Jesus because of her own worries and distractions. She's doing what any of us would want to do if Jesus came by for dinner—she's being hospitable! She's trying to whip up something good in the kitchen, following the good example of her ancestor Abraham who practiced hospitality and entertained angels unawares in the story we heard from Genesis.<sup>4</sup> It's entirely possible that the scandal that I mentioned dawned on her as she busily prepared the meal and her sister sat at Jesus' feet. Maybe that's why she got worried and distracted and got rough with Jesus about Mary. Or, maybe it's as simple as

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<sup>3</sup> John Julian, *Stars in a Dark World: Stories of the Saints and Holy Days of the Liturgy (Kindle Edition)* (Waukesha, WI: The Order Of Julian Of Norwich, 2009), Loc. 9547.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace, Loc. 9673.

she was overwhelmed because she was doing too much. Sometimes, in an effort to please or impress, we simply do too much. Whether it's at dinner, or work, or in our home life, suddenly, it's overwhelming. It's too much. Next thing we know we're lashing out at someone. Maybe that's what happened. Maybe she was doing a multiple course meal for Jesus when a simple spaghetti and salad would have been plenty. Then, as she worried over everything around her, seeing her sister there and no one helping . . . she decided to make her frustration known. Whatever the case, Martha lost her focus on what was most important: Jesus. He was there to spend time with her and her sister. In her efforts to be hospitable, she missed the boat.

This is what Jesus is correcting her about—her worry and distraction. He's not correcting her because somehow he likes Mary better, or thinks what Mary's doing is better. Offering someone hospitality is a good thing, and Martha isn't doing a thing wrong. He only corrects Martha about what she's doing once she begins to complain about it. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." There's another paraphrase translation that I think makes the point better. It says, "Martha! Martha! You're worrying and fretting about a lot of things, when a few or even one is plenty. Now Mary has made a wise choice, which shall not be denied her."<sup>5</sup>

*When a few or even one is plenty.* I think that gets right at it. There's nothing wrong with technology. Our smartphones are a wonder, and can be used in a variety of useful ways. But, is it useful to have them out at dinner using them to text someone else

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<sup>5</sup> Clarence Jordan, *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts: Jesus' Doings and the Happenings* (Clinton, NJ: New Win Publishing, 1969), 48.

when there's a live human being sitting right in front of me? There's nothing wrong with watching the news or reading it online, but when it's got me so worked up that I can't spend time with the people around me without worrying over it or complaining about it, is it worth it? A dinner made to be hospitable to friends is wonderful, but when we go to so much trouble that we can't enjoy ourselves or the friends in our midst, is it worth it? Things become unhealthy when they begin to make us lose our focus on the relationships with people around us. Why worry about many things when a few or even one is plenty? Balance is key.

Martha was missing out. She had *Jesus in her home*. What an opportunity! Mary had chosen the better part because she knew what the most important thing was in the moment, and it wasn't making sure dinner was perfect. So what if that load of clothes doesn't get done tonight if I can spend a little one on one time with my spouse? Do I really need to work on that work presentation right now when my kids want me to play with them? Why am I wasting another half hour on Facebook when I could go outside (without my Pokémon app) and enjoy some exercise and the beautiful weather, or read a good book under a tree? Would it kill me to put the phone away and turn off the TV so I can have a conversation a dinner with the people who love me? Are we making the relationships in our life a priority, or are we too worried and distracted by many things? Are we approaching lives filled with distraction with an attitude of balance?

And what of our relationship with Jesus? After all, our relationship with God is the most important relationship. That's really what the Mary & Martha story is drawing our attention towards: Martha has lost her focus on Jesus, and has let the worries and distractions of her life block her from the kind of relationship that Mary is enjoying. Our

relationship with God is the one that informs all of our other relationships. There are plenty of things out there to take our focus off of Jesus, as Martha can attest. What are the worries and distractions keeping you from offering God your full attention? I can't help but think of the great sixteenth century reformer Martin Luther who was heard to say, "I have so much to do today that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer." That's how he kept his focus, and Martin Luther got more work done in his lifetime than probably any of us ever will. Is it that there're too many distractions and too many worries in life? Or is it that we're just not staying focused on the one thing that's the most important?

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