

**SOUL RESET:
It's Not All On Me**

Luke 10:38-42

Let Martha rest.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
March 15, 2020

Insurance was invented in the 19th century, and shortly after that, insurance fraud was invented. Especially in the shipping industry, the unscrupulous owners of ships would overload their ships and over-insure their cargo and send them out to sea to sink in the first storm they encountered. So many seamen were lost, they began to call the vessels “coffin ships.” Losing insured ships was good business for the owners, but it was driving the fledgling insurance companies bankrupt.

A British politician named Samuel Plimsoll applied his Christian faith and sense of justice to end this gruesome practice. He campaigned for several years against the coffin ships. Finally, in 1873, Parliament passed the Merchant Shipping Act, which required all ships to have a line painted on the hull to show how deeply they could sit in the water and still be safe. This line became known as the Plimsoll line, and if the boat sank below that line, the captain was arrested and the owners fined.¹

There’s a line in our lives that shows we’re sinking too low. That line has to do with chronic busyness, overwork, stress and fatigue. The line is there for our safety. Cross that line, and it could lead to our destruction.

We are developing this sermon series from a book by Dr. Junius Dotson called *Soul Reset*.² In the book, Dotson tells his story as a successful United Methodist pastor. He started a church in California, which grew tremendously, but the stress of leading a growing church took him to the brink of exhaustion. As the church grew, Junius tried to be the one doing everything to make the church grow. His original vision was just to lead people to Jesus, but the reality of running a church was so much more complicated than that. As the church began to succeed and grow, there was the extra pressure of keeping it successfully growing. He couldn’t let it fail now! It seemed he had created a monster that was eating up all his time and energy. There was always more to do than he could get done. As he became the pastor for more and more people, he tried to be the fixer and rescuer for all their problems as well. He thought he was indispensable to the health of his congregation, but in fact, he was destroying his own health. He said he had put himself in the place of God. Eventually, shouldering this massive responsibility with no break, no relief, no help led to a physical and emotional breakdown.

I get it. I’ve been there myself. I love being a pastor, but ministry can consume a person. It can lead to exhaustion and burnout very easily. The image that I have used for ministry for many years—and it actually applies to most of our lives—is the plate spinner from the old Ed Sullivan Show. If you’re too young to remember that, the Ed Sullivan Show was a variety show that was popular when I was a kid. Ed would have various acts, one after another, like the first time the Beatles performed in America. One of his recurring artists (eight times!) was a guy from Austria named Erich Brenn.³ Brenn had perfected an old circus act in which he would spin plates on the tops of slender poles. He would get one spinning, then another, then another.

Then one of the plates would slow down and start to wobble, and Brenn would run to it and get it spinning again before he dashed off to get another one going. It was totally frenetic and exhausting to watch. But obviously it was unforgettable, too. Sometimes our lives feel like we are in one long plate-spinning act. We just want to rest, but we can't let the plates fall.

This week has been like spinning plates. I should have seen it coming: first the time change, then the full moon, then Friday the 13th, all in one week. Of course, much of my week was spent trying to keep up with developments with the covid-19 virus. This has been unprecedented, at least in my lifetime and career. It's been crazy, and it will get worse before it gets better. I know it *will* get better, but for now, here is one more thing that adds uncertainty and anxiety to our lives, our church, our community, and our world.

It is good on a day like today to remember the kind of life Jesus wants for us. Our key verse in this series comes from Matthew 11 in *The Message* translation, where Jesus offers the invitation to "*Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. ... Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.*"⁴ Jesus didn't exactly live in an environment that was free of anxiety and danger and turmoil. But yet he calls us to live freely and lightly in the unforced rhythms of grace. How do we do that today?

Two good friends of Jesus were the sisters Martha and Mary. We learn from the Gospel of John that they also had a brother named Lazarus, but he doesn't appear in our text today. The three siblings lived in Bethany, just a couple of miles east of Jerusalem. Jesus would stay there during the last week of his life. This incident is a little out of place, because Jesus is nowhere near Bethany at this point, but I'll tell you why later. For this text, it is enough to know that Jesus and his disciples came for dinner.

We know these two sisters. Martha is the busy one. She is all about making her guests comfortable, getting them food, scurrying around to make sure everything is just right. She is the task-oriented sister. She doesn't necessarily love Jesus less; she just shows her love in action.

Mary is the people-oriented sister. She is more of a free spirit. She is willing to let dinner wait while she sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to him talk. That in itself portrays her boldness, because women did not sit with the men, and rabbis did not teach women. Mary's presence in the room was pretty daring.

But Martha won't have it, and we understand. Have you ever had to fix for a group when somebody who should be helping is ignoring their duties and enjoying the party? It's irritating; ask my wife! Martha is so distracted by all her work that she can't pay attention to Jesus, so she complains, "*Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.*"⁵ But Jesus has a different instruction for Martha: "*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."⁶ The Message puts it, "*it's the main course, and won't be taken from her.*"

There has to be a balance. Martha and Mary are the two sides of a spiritual life: doing and being, action and contemplation, inner faith and outer service. Neither one is complete without the other. We have to have both if we are going to be spiritually healthy.

I mentioned that this incident is a little out of place in the Gospel. Jesus is still in Galilee at this point, and Bethany is near Jerusalem. That's probably why Luke didn't identify the location. But he tells the story at this point in the narrative because Jesus has just told the story to the lawyer about the Good Samaritan. The punch line to the Good Samaritan story comes when Jesus asks the lawyer who proved to be a good neighbor to the injured man, and the lawyer says, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." Then he turns right around and tells Martha that she should be more like Mary, sitting at his feet. Sometimes Jesus says, "Go and do." Sometimes Jesus says, "Sit and listen." Sometimes each one is necessary for spiritual health. There has to be a balance.

The issue in this text is priority. What's the most important thing? What is the one thing Mary gets that Martha doesn't?

One of my favorite movie scenes is in the film *City Slickers* starring Billy Crystal and Jack Palance. Billy plays a guy Mitch from New York City who comes to a dude ranch out west to have an adventure and renew his spirit. Palance plays a grizzled old cowboy named Curly. Out on the trail one day they start talking about the meaning of life. Curly holds up one finger and says, "That's the secret of life."

Crystal replies, "Your finger?"

Curly says, "One thing. Just one thing. The rest don't mean [squat]."

Mitch asks, "Yeah, but what's the one thing?"

Curly replies, "That's what you have to decide."⁷

We're talking about the focus of our lives. We're talking about priorities. How do we keep the main thing the main thing? How do we keep first things first? How do we keep the demands of life and the chronic busyness of every day from draining us, exhausting us, and propelling us toward a breakdown?

The answer is really so simple. Not easy, but simple. Do as Mary did. Sit at the feet of Jesus. Spend time with God. Take time for prayer. Be in worship that connects you to God. Read the Holy Word of God that tells the story of God's love for you. Busyness is not the way of Christ. Hectic plate-spinning, even religious hyperactivity, cannot substitute for intimacy with God. Carve out time for moments when you can be in awe and wonder at what God has done.

Years ago, Christian author Dennis Benson told a story about Andrew, a fifteen-year-old boy who was normal in every physical way, but for some unknown reason, his mind had stopped growing about the age of four. Andrew's dad, Barry, just could not accept the fact that Andrew's mental development had just stopped at that point. Barry was successful; Barry was active and productive and busy all the time. Surely Andrew could do better if he just tried harder.

Over the years, Barry's disappointment in his son continued to build. His anger and resentment compounded until he had a nervous breakdown. With the help of a counselor, Barry admitted that a large part of his problem was his hostility toward Andrew. But when Barry began to see Andrew for who he was rather than who he wanted him to be, he discovered what a wonderful and sweet kid Andrew really was. When Barry began to love Andrew for who he was, Andrew in turn began to blossom.

In Andrew's Sunday School class, his teacher had made the connection between the rising of the sun and the moon and the constantly renewed love of God. Andrew became totally enthralled with this idea and asked his dad if they could watch the moon rise together. So on the next clear night, the moon was full, and Andrew and Barry and the whole family gathered on the back porch to watch the moon rise. As the moon rose over the horizon, Andrew literally shook with excitement. Then, as it moved into full view, Andrew did something he had never done before. He reached out and encircled his father with his arms. This man-child, with the body of a young adult and the mind of a pre-schooler, just wrapped his dad up in love. Barry was completely taken by surprise, and he began to cry. Andrew just held on, then he said, "I've never seen the moon rise before, have you, Dad?"

As they all sat there in silence, Andrew's wonder infected the whole family. They all realized that, no, they had never really seen the moon rise like they had that night. When the moon had fully ascended into the night sky, Andrew spoke in a hushed and awestruck voice, "God just keeps on loving all of us, you know, Dad?"⁸

It was a Mary moment. It was a moment that was lived freely and lightly in the unforced rhythm of God's grace. It was a moment of life like Jesus wants for each of us today.

Each week during the "Soul Reset" series, we are going to offer a spiritual practice for you to try. This is to help your Lenten preparation for Easter as well as for your general spiritual health. This week we want to talk about fasting. Fasting may be the least popular and least practiced of the spiritual disciplines, for obvious reasons. Fasting means you give something up. It means denying yourself something. We don't care to do that usually.

But fasting can be a great practice to help you focus your life. When you are fasting, you can pay attention to God because something that was distracting you

from God is not in play any more. The “many things” that distracted Martha go by the wayside, and the “one thing” of Mary comes into view.

Self-denial is not just to punish ourselves or to make ourselves miserable for some reason. To say “no” to self is to say “yes” to God. We say “no” to some competing desire so that we can focus on the One who gives us life—initially, abundantly, and eternally.

Fasting from food is traditional and historical—fasting from all food or some foods for a period of time. That still works. Your physical hunger can remind you of your spiritual hunger for God. But maybe you don’t need to fast for reasons of physical health; there are many other good ways to fast. We’ve listed some of them in the worship bulletin. You can fast from social media, fast from talking, fast from plastic, fast from excessive behaviors, fast from complaining and criticism, or fast from technology.

We don’t offer these ideas to you just to add yet another thing or to make your life even more complicated. Whatever fast you choose, let it be a way that you sit at the feet of Jesus. Let it help you focus your spirit on the one thing. Let it prioritize the many items and concerns of your life. Let it draw the line that will keep you from shipwreck. Let it center your soul where it needs to be. Let your fasting be done freely and lightly in the unforced rhythms of God’s grace, because this is the only way we truly live.

¹ “Samuel Plimsoll - the seaman's friend,” *BBC.Co.Uk* (5-19-08); “A Cheer for Samuel Plimsoll,” *99% Invisible*.

² Junius B. Dotson, *Soul Reset: Breakdown, Breakthrough, and the Journey to Wholeness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019).

³ <https://www.edsullivan.com/artists/erich-brenn-plate-spinner/>.

⁴ Matthew 11: 29-30. *The Message*.

⁵ Luke 10:40.

⁶ Luke 10:41f.

⁷ “City Slickers,” written by Lowell Ganz, directed by Ron Underwood, 1991.

⁸ William O. Reeves, “Sister Act,” a sermon preached at First United Methodist Church, Bryant, Arkansas, October 6, 2002.