Sunday, July 19, 1998
CHOOSE THE BETTER PART
Luke 10:38-42

You've probably noticed, as I have, that we often allow ourselves to get all worked up about things that, upon closer examination, aren't really that big a deal. We focus on little problems and concerns and blow them way out of proportion.

For example, a stranger might cut in front of us in traffic. Rather than let it go and move on with our day, we convince ourselves we are justified in our anger. We might even play out an imaginary confrontation in our minds. Some of us might even tell someone else about the incident later on rather than letting it go.

Why not instead simply allow the driver to have his accident somewhere else? Try to have compassion for the person and remember how painful it is to be in such an enormous hurry. This way, we can maintain our own sense of well-being and avoid taking other people's problems personally.

You can think of many such examples that occur every day in your life. Whether you had to wait in line, listen to unfair criticism, or do the lion's share of the work, it pays enormous dividends if you learn not to worry about little things.

That's part of what Jesus was trying to teach Martha in this little story in Luke's Gospel. He was the honored guest in the home of Mary and Martha. Mary took time to visit with their guest and engage him in conversation. Martha, on the other hand, was distracted by her many tasks. She was worried about little things. Worse still, she refused to accept responsibility for her own anxiety. She blamed it on Jesus. She said, "Teacher, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me." It's your fault that I have to do all the work.

When some things in life do not meet our expectations, many of us operate on the assumption, "When in doubt, it must be someone else's fault." Something is missing, so someone must've moved it; the car isn't working, so the mechanic must have repaired it incorrectly; your expenses exceed your income, so your spouse must be spending too much money; the house is a mess, so you must be the only person doing your part; Mary is not helping me in the kitchen, so it must be that Jesus doesn't understand how much work it is to prepare for a guest. Why doesn't he tell my sister to get out here and help me? My worry and anxiety are all his fault.

This type of blaming thinking has been with us a long time, as this little story from the Bible indicates. On a personal level, it continues to lead us to believe that we are never completely responsible for our own worries, actions, problems, or unhappiness. When we are in the habit of blaming others, it keeps us from accepting any responsibility for our worries, our anxiousness, anger, frustration, stress, and unhappiness.

In terms of personal well-being, you cannot be peaceful while at the same time blaming others. Of course, there are times when other people and/or circumstances contribute to our problems, but it is we who must rise to the occasion and take responsibility for our own well-being. Circumstances don't make a person; they reveal him or her.

Here's an extreme example. There was a woman who spent all of her days fretting about how badly life had treated her. A bright career person who had once had a responsible position became bitter because of a series of events that resulted in her dismissal. To cut expenses and conserve a meager income, she moved into the basement of her house and rented out the upstairs. There she lived in chilly isolation with her cat, brooding on ways to get even. Every waking minute, she stewed in her own misery, telephoning anyone who would listen to her story. She bemoaned her helplessness, accused family and friends of conspiring to injure her, and blamed the community for being heartless and cruel.

A colleague who told me this story said she would call him and talk with him nonstop for an hour or more. If he tried to limit her, she would say, "You're just like all the others — no time to listen to someone who needs help." She pleaded for friendship, but seemed only to want an audience. My colleague tried to connect her with potential friends (people who were untiringly patient and caring), but she soon sucked them dry with her endless complaining. All she did was blame others and cultivate her own misery.

Blaming others takes an enormous amount of mental energy. It's a drag-me-down mindset that creates stress and anxiety. Worse still, it makes you feel powerless over your own life because your happiness is contingent on the actions and behaviors of others, which you can't control.

When you stop blaming others, you will regain your sense of personal power. You will see yourself as a choice maker.

That's the first point Jesus tried to make with Martha when he said to her, "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." You have the choice whether or not to be anxious and worried about little things, but if you keep blaming others for your problems, you're never going to make the right choice.

The second point that Jesus was making with his comment, "Choose the better part," is that there are a number of things, events, and problems in life that are not important enough to worry about.

In order to discover what issues in life are worth being anxious about and which are not, here's a little game that you can play with yourself. It's called "time warp." To play this game, all you have to do is imagine that whatever circumstance you are dealing with isn't happening right now but a year from now. Then simply ask yourself, "Is this situation really as important as I'm making it out to be?" Once in a great while, it may be — but the vast majority of the time, it simply isn't. Whether it be an argument with your spouse, child, or boss, a mistake, a lost opportunity, a work-related rejection, a sprained ankle, or a complaint that your sister is not helping you enough in the kitchen when you have a guest, chances are a year from now you aren't going to care. It will be one more irrelevant detail in your life. While this simple game won't solve all of your problems, it can give you an enormous amount of needed perspective. I find myself laughing at things that I used to take far too seriously.

A member of this congregation who died several years ago, and who was a close friend of mine and much wiser than I, taught me another version of this game years ago. We would be talking together, and he would listen to some of my worries and complaints, and then he would say, "Think about it, will that make a difference in your life 50 years from now?"

“Choose the better part,” said Jesus. His first point was, “If you continually blame others for your anxiousness, you will not be able to choose the better parts of life because you’re too busy blaming others to even recognize the better parts.”

And his second point was, “Is the issue really important enough to deserve so much worry, anxiety, and complaining?” You cannot choose the better part without a sense of perspective.

The third point this little story about Mary and Martha makes is, you are on the way to choosing the better part in life when you learn to live in the present moment.

To a large degree, the measure of our peace of mind is determined by how much we are able to live in the present moment. No matter what happened yesterday or last year and what may or may not happen tomorrow, the present moment is where you are — always. Take advantage of it. Savor it.

Many of us have mastered the neurotic art of spending much of our lives worrying about a variety of things all at once. We allow past problems and future worries to dominate our present moments, so much so that we end up anxious, frustrated, depressed, and hopeless.

Someone said, “Life is what’s happening while we’re busy making other plans.” Meanwhile, when we are busy making other plans, our children are busy growing up, the people we love are moving away, our bodies are getting out of shape, and our dreams are slipping away. In short, we miss out on life.

Many people live as if life were a dress rehearsal for some later date. It isn’t. In fact, no one has a guarantee that he or she will be here tomorrow. Now is the only time we have and the only time that we have any control over. That’s what Jesus was trying to tell Martha when he said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted about many things, there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Henri Nouwen said it this way, “The spiritual life is not a life before, after, or beyond our everyday existence. No, the spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of here and now.”

Here’s a personal story written by Ann Wells of the Los Angeles Times, which I believe illustrates this point that Jesus was trying to make with Martha.

My brother-in-law opened the bottom drawer of my sister’s bureau and lifted out a tissue-wrapped package. “This,” he said, “is not a slip. This is lingerie.” He discarded the tissue and handed me the slip. It was exquisite; silk, handmade, and trimmed with lace. The price tag with an astronomical figure on it was still attached. My brother-in-law said, “Jan bought this the first time we went to New York, at least 8 or 9 years ago. She never wore it.”

“She was saving it for a special occasion. Well, I guess this is the occasion.” He took the slip from me and put it on the bed with the other clothes we were taking to the mortician. His hands lingered on the soft material for a moment, then he slammed the drawer shut and turned to me. “Don’t ever save anything for a special occasion. Every day you’re alive is a special occasion.”

I remembered those words through the funeral and the days that followed when I helped him and my niece attend to all the sad chores that follow an unexpected death. I thought about

them on the plane returning to California from the Midwestern town where my sister's family lives. I thought about all the things that she hadn't seen or heard or done. I thought about the things that she had done without realizing that they were special.

I'm still thinking about his words, and they've changed my life. I'm reading more and dusting less. I'm sitting on the deck and admiring the view without fussing about the weeds in the garden. I'm spending more time with my family and friends and less time in committee meetings. Whenever possible, life should be a pattern of experience to savor, not endure. I'm trying to recognize these moments now and cherish them.

I'm not "saving" anything; we use our good china and crystal for every special event — such as losing pounds, getting the sink unstopped, or the first camellia blossom. I wear my good blazer to the market if I feel like it. My theory is if I look prosperous, I can shell out $28.49 for one small bag of groceries without wincing. I'm not saving my good perfume for special parties; clerks in hardware stores and tellers in banks have noses that function as well as my party-going friends. "Someday" and "one of these days" are losing their grip on my vocabulary. If it's worth seeing or hearing or doing, I want to see and hear and do it now.

I'm not sure what my sister would've done had she known that she wouldn't be here for the tomorrow we all take for granted. I think she would have called family members and a few close friends to apologize and mend fences for past squabbles. I like to think she would have gone out for a Chinese dinner, her favorite food. I'm guessing. I'll never know. It's those little things left undone that would make me angry if I knew that my hours were limited. Angry because I put off seeing good friends whom I was going to get in touch with someday.

Angry because I hadn't written certain letters that I intended to write one of these days. Angry and sorry that I didn't tell my husband and daughter often enough how much I truly love them. I'm trying very hard not to put off, hold back, or save anything that will add laughter and luster to our lives. And every morning when I open my eyes, I tell myself that it is special. Every day, every minute, every breath truly is...a gift from God. Choose the better part, which means seeing every day, every breath truly is a gift from God. Amen.