

Palo Verde

Preached FCCW July 21, 2019

Luke 10:38-42

Today's message marks the halfway point in our sermon series on "Stuff I Learned from My Summer Vacation." The focus of the series has been how lessons about God can be found in the natural world all around us, if we are perceptive enough to notice them. And this Summer, some of my most memorable lessons about God have come during my vacation in Sedona, Arizona. In fact, the focal point of this morning's sermon is Arizona's official state tree—the Palo Verde tree.

Palo Verde in Spanish literally means "green stick"; which is perfectly descriptive of this tree. Because unlike most other trees, the Palo Verde grows not only green leaves, but also green bark along the length of its trunk and branches. The green color of the bark is due to the presence of chlorophyll, the same chemical that gives leaves their green color. Chlorophyll is the essential ingredient that makes photosynthesis possible, allowing the tree to convert the energy in sunlight into chemical energy that feeds the life of the tree. During especially dry, hot periods in the desert climate of Sedona, the Palo Verde drops its leaves in order to conserve water. When the leaves fall, the Palo Verde's trunk and branches assume the work of photosynthesis. It's as if the Palo Verde knows what it most needs to live and essentially orients its whole being to receiving what is most necessary to keep it alive.

In Luke's description of Jesus' visit to the home of Martha, the behavior of Martha's sister Mary bears some similarity to the Palo Verde tree. It says that she sat at Jesus' feet, listening in rapt attention to his words. So absorbed was she in what he was saying, that she forgot all about helping her sister Martha with preparing the meal. Every molecule of her being was riveted on Jesus, the way that every cell of the Palo Verde's surface is engaged in the singular purpose of absorbing the sun's light. Eventually, Martha complains to Jesus, that Mary is neglecting her share of the work.

Jesus' response to Martha is sometimes interpreted as being delivered in a chastising tone of voice. But it's almost certain that Jesus' repetition of Martha's name was meant to convey empathy and understanding, rather than a stern rebuke of her. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."

The word *distracted* appears in two consecutive verses in relation to Martha. First, the narrator notes that Martha was *distracted* by her many tasks. Then, in the very next verse is Jesus' observation that Martha was *worried and distracted by many things*.

Subtle warnings about how worry and distraction can be obstacles to following Jesus seem to have been one of Luke's favorite subjects when he wrote his gospel. The journey to Jerusalem which brought Jesus to Martha's doorstep began with him *setting his face* to go to Jerusalem. That means Jesus refused to be distracted from the purpose and importance of his journey.

Whether he was healing the sick, debating with Pharisees or teaching the multitudes, Jesus never lost his focus on where he was going and why he was going there.

On the other hand, just about everyone else around him on the journey seems to be distracted by other things.

When he warns his disciples that in Jerusalem he will be betrayed, instead of taking the gravity of his words to heart, they get distracted by arguing over which one of them is the greatest disciple.

When he sends his disciples out on their own, he gives them explicit, detailed instructions about how to pack, how to travel and where to lodge, in order to prevent their mission from being sabotaged by distractions along the route.

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus encounters three would-be-followers who get distracted from following him by less important things.

As they traveled, Jesus reminded his disciples that worrying about things that were beyond their control rather than trusting God, would get in the way of their striving first for God's kingdom.

Then, there is Martha, who is worried and distracted by many things, which include not only what she *is doing*, but even more so, what her sister is *not doing*. Namely, helping in the kitchen. Jesus' response to Martha is not delivered as a criticism for her busyness. It is an observation of the effect her busyness is having on her. Martha was doing nothing wrong. But what she was doing served as a distraction from doing the most important thing she might be doing instead. Jesus commends Mary for having chosen the *one thing that is really needed*. Which was giving her full attention to Jesus' teaching.

At this point, even if Martha had sat and listened to Jesus, as Mary was doing, that wouldn't necessarily have stopped her from obsessing about the work that wasn't getting done so that she could be truly present to Jesus.

Maybe you too have sat in a church service, or tried to pray in solitude, but just could not experience God's presence because your attention was divided by worries and distractions about other things. But the opposite can also happen. We can be at work or at play and find ourselves very much aware of God's presence in the midst of not very religious settings or activities.

A 17th century monastic named Brother Lawrence wrote a book called "The Practice of the Presence of God." In it he remarks that, "In the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees in the Chapel."

Experiencing the presence of God does not always happen automatically. You and I are not 100% oriented to God the way the Palo Verde tree is 100% oriented towards the sunlight.

Sometimes we have to make a conscious choice to let go of our worries and distractions. Most times we have to make an intentional practice of it. Otherwise, even our most well intended or purely motivated actions, just get in the way.

That may mean resisting the external distractions that flow from our own busyness, by finding time in a busy schedule to pray, or worship in church. But it also means overcoming internal distractions that get in the way of our being mindful of God's presence, and weaken our expectations for the rewards of deepening our relationship with God.

Mary is the first person Jesus encounters on the way to Jerusalem who mirrors Jesus' own singlemindedness. She does it by giving him her complete, undistracted attention. As he has set his face towards Jerusalem, she has set her face to following him. Which also means, *choosing to set aside* her distractions.

She is the Palo Verde tree to his sunlight.

That is why Jesus can say, "Mary has *chosen* the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

And if Mary can choose the better part, so can we.

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