

Modern-day Proverbs Sermon Series
Too Many Irons in the Fire – Luke 10:38-42
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Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

Of all the sermons I've preached – and I've preached a few – the ones that I heard people talk about the most are from a sermon series called "That's Not in the Bible." I preached on phrases that people quote as biblical, but that are in the Bible and can actually have a negative effect. Like the phrase "God never gives you more than you can handle," which implies that God gives us things like Covid and depression and sudden deaths. Or my favorite, "everything happens for a reason." What's the reason for a teenager getting cancer or a person flying a plane into a building? I believe God is at work in all things, no matter how bad they are, but some things just happen for no reason. Life is cruel that way.

As I was ruminating on those phrases, I started thinking about things we say that should be in the Bible, but aren't. These are sayings that contain a lot of wisdom, but weren't around when Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs. So, in this sermon series, we're going to look at a few of these modern phrases to see the biblical wisdom they contain. Maybe when they get around to updating the Bible and editing out the problematic parts we can petition to put these in.

Today's saying is "too many irons in the fire." This idiom has been in use since the mid-1500s and comes from the world of blacksmithing. If a smithy heated too many pieces of metal in the forge at once, he ran the risk of ruining some of them. Therefore, you didn't want to have too many irons in the fire at once. Another way of saying this is, "I have too much on my plate," which, if you've ever been to a church potluck, you know that's a virtual impossibility. You can always fit one more scoop of corn pudding on there.

The meaning that underlies this phrase is that if you have too much going on at once, you may lose focus and take your eye off what really matters. In the movie "City Slickers," Billy Crystal plays a big-city salesman caught in a mid-life rut who tries to regain his focus by spending time on a real-life dude ranch. While he's there he meets Curly, a tough, wizened cowboy, whom Crystal describes as "a saddlebag with eyes." In one of their conversations, Curly, sensing Crystal's quiet desperation and search for purpose, says to him, "Do you know what the secret of life is?" Then he holds up his finger and says, "This." Crystal says, "The secret of life is your finger?" Curly replies, "One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean nothing." Crystal says, "But what's the one thing?" And Curly replies, "That's what *you* have to find out."

Jesus must have watched "City Slickers" right before he visited Mary and Martha, because when Martha comes to him full of exasperation and anger at Mary, Jesus says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." Only one thing? Did Jesus have any awareness of the situation? Did he know how busy Martha was? Of course she's worried and distracted by many things! I used to have a bumper sticker that feeds into this approach to spirituality. It said, "Jesus is coming; look busy!" That was certainly Martha's approach because Jesus really WAS coming, not for Judgment Day, but for dinner. And he was bringing his disciples with him. That means that on very short notice, Martha had to prepare a meal for at least 14 people. This was before Costco and Clicklist. And oh, by the way, one of the visitors is the son of God so you better not burn the pot roast. Through no fault of her own, Martha had to put a lot of irons in the fire.

She was busy. Crazy busy. A read an article recently that says being busy is a sickness, because it takes a physical, mental, and spiritual toll on us. We say we're busy like it's an albatross around our necks – "Ugh, I'm so busy!" – but if we're honest with ourselves, we wear it more like a badge of honor. Because to be busy means you are needed, you have responsibility, you are the kind of person who gets things done. When someone asks how you're doing, it feels good to answer, "I'm busy!" No one responds to "How are you?" with "I'm lazy." It looks good to be busy, and Martha was busy.

Jesus and his crowd arrive a little early so the food hasn't quite finished cooking and the table still needs setting. Martha excuses herself to the kitchen to finish the preparations, probably expecting her sister Mary to follow her, to lend a hand, to at least offer to hang up the disciples' tunics or get them a drink. But when Martha peeks out into the living room, wondering where Mary is and why she isn't helping, there's her younger sister, sitting at teacher's feet, which was a spot of learning exclusively reserved for male students like the disciples.

Can you understand Martha's reaction? Can you feel her anger? Not only is Mary breaking social etiquette by acting like a male disciple, but there's all that work still to be done, and Mary has yet to stir a pot. If you've ever been the only one cleaning up after a big meal, you know what Martha felt. No one likes to be left holding the dishtowel. So, Martha boldly approaches Jesus and takes her stand, a stand that I believe any of us would be making at this point: "Lord, don't you care that I'm doing all the work by myself? Tell Mary to help me!" But Jesus gently shakes his head, "Martha, Martha."

It's very tempting in this passage to want to cast Mary as the good person and Martha as the bad person. But to do so does a grave injustice to Martha and all those like her. Martha is the patron saint of multitasking, and this world simply would not exist without her spiritual brothers and sisters. She gets the job done, and the world needs men and women and boys and girls who get the job done. The world would come to a grinding halt without responsible people like Martha. Right now, you Martha types are making out your grocery lists in the margins of the bulletin. What's wrong with being a Martha? Why is Jesus so critical of her?

He is not, as I read it, criticizing Martha for being busy. He's not saying to her that such work doesn't have to be done; obviously it does. You can't have a pitch-in supper unless someone pitches in. You can't have a clean kitchen unless someone cleans. I believe under normal circumstances Jesus would applaud Martha's efforts, lift her up as a shining example of hospitality, someone who walks the walk of a servant faith.

But these aren't normal circumstances. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He's on his way to die on the cross. He may never be with Mary and Martha again. Mary recognized the significance of Jesus' visit to her house, and she put her other irons aside to make sure she spent time with him. The dishes would still be there after dinner; Jesus wouldn't. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, would Martha regret that she didn't get all the leftovers put away, or would she regret that she hadn't spent more time with Jesus? According to Jesus, she has too many irons in the fire. She doesn't choose wisely. She makes the mistake of thinking that Jesus can wait. We are called to be both hearers and doers of the word. Martha was all do and no hear, and there are spiritual consequences for this.

Remember the line from the psalm 46? "Be still and know that I am God." The implied antithesis is, "Don't be still and forget that I am God." Jesus says, "Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things." The Message translation says, "You're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing." The more we do without grounding ourselves at the feet of Jesus, the more we get distracted. The more we forget. The more church becomes just one

among many options. The more we stop seeing the least of these around us. If we have too much going on, do we run the risk of missing the most important thing?

You see, that's the problem with Martha. In her mind, Jesus was just one of many irons. And we're even more susceptible to that rationalization. For Mary and Martha, the time with Jesus was limited. But for us, he's already died, come back, and gone to Heaven. We're told now that Jesus is always with us, so where's the urgency to spend time with him? Jesus can wait. "As soon as I get my things done, then I'll spend time with Jesus." Of course, the problem is that either we're so tired when we finish that Jesus gets our leftovers instead of full attention, or, what's more likely, we never get to our time with Jesus at all. And we keep piling things on our plates and putting irons in the fire and prioritizing other things besides our faith.

Being still in our crazy busy world today is as much about our spirituality as it is our mobility. It's important to physically be still, but it's also important to let our soul rest, to ground it in an daily devotion that comes to our email or a brief prayer of thanks or a good cup of coffee with a trusted friend. You may only have time for five minutes of stillness today, but that's enough. What are you doing to be still, to remind yourself that you are not the only one bearing this yoke of responsibility, to be reminded that before you are all these roles you play, you are a loved and beloved child of God? I've come to believe that my worthiness is directly related to my level of productivity. But if I stop to listen, I would learn from Jesus that my worth is not defined by how much I do, but by who I am, who I was created to be. No amount of activity will change my value in God's eyes. Be still and know.

Jesus says, "There is need of only one thing." What's the one thing? I can't answer that for you. Your one thing may not be my one thing. It could be starting a journal or investing in a relationship or reading a book or silencing the technology around you. It could mean saying "no" to some things so you can say "yes" to your one thing. Whatever it is, I'm pretty sure it involves slowing down, sitting still, and listening. Do we have time for that? Do we have time to breathe? Or are we just too busy? "Let me finish what I've got to do, Jesus, then I'll be with you." There are so many things! Be still and remember that God is God and you are not and there are indeed so many things, but really, ultimately, there is one thing.