

*Traveling with Jesus sermon series*

*“At the Home of Two Sisters”*

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

Many years ago, Tom Friedman, the American author and columnist had a column in the New York Times, called, “The Taxi Driver.” He wrote about an interesting taxi ride he had from Charles de Gaulle Airport to Paris. During the one-hour ride, the taxi driver was not only driving the car, but also talking non-stop on his cellphone and even watching a video on the screen that was to be a GPS.

Of course, the taxi driver’s behavior made Friedman quite nervous, but he decided to occupy himself with working on a column and listening to his iPod. Reflecting on the nerve-racking taxi ride, the columnist wrote, “There was only one thing we never did: talk to each other.”

Actually, what the French taxi driver did over a decade ago is a modern day phenomenon, and it’s called “continuous partial attention.” It is a term, coined two decades ago by Linda Stone, a former Apple and Microsoft executive. It means you are paying attention, but only partially.

Stone says on her website (<https://lindastone.net>) that continuous partial attention is a disease of the Internet age, and it’s different from multi-tasking. What motivates us to multi-task is a desire to be more productive and more efficient. In fact, multi-tasking can be efficient and productive, especially when we do things that are simple and require very little cognitive processing.

Here are some examples. While you clean your house, you can listen to music and dance around. While you file documents, you can answer the phone call and eat your lunch. While you study, you can listen to your favorite music and chit chat with your friend.

One of my clergy friends is called the king of multi-tasking, and he prides himself in being able to do several things simultaneously. Whenever he is at a meeting, he takes notes, reads and replies to his emails and texts, makes Facebook and Instagram posts, and tweets! He always keeps himself busy because he does not want to waste any minute of his awake time.

However, according to Linda Stone, what my friend does is not multi-tasking but paying continuous partial attention to many things.

Stone says, what motivates us to pay partial attention continuously is a desire to connect and stay connected. Being exposed to a large volume of information and data through fast and easy Internet access, with the world continually at our fingertips, we want to scan for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts in any given moment. We pay continuous partial attention, trying not to miss anything that is going on out there in the world.

Stone says this state of being always-on, anywhere and anytime, can be functional in small doses. But, in large doses, it creates an artificial sense of constant crisis. Since most of these crises are someplace else, we are everywhere except where we actually are physically. As a result, we end up being always on high alert.

Think about it. Nowadays, most of us use computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Even our watches are smart devices! As long as they are on, we hear and see notifications of emails and posts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Skype, YouTube, Tumblr, and Snapchat. They ping, chirp and whistle. They fly across your screen. They all shout for your attention: "Look at me!" "Someone wants to be your friend!" "Someone has just posted a new picture!" "Someone liked your post!" "Someone commented on your post!" "This is a great opportunity. You would not want to miss it!"

And, even when they are not on, you wonder who might be trying to get a hold of you, or what's happening in the world now, what opportunities you might be missing.

So, with continuous partial attention driven by a fear of missing out, we find ourselves habitually looking at our cellphones all the time. We do it while eating our meals, talking to our children, walking our dogs, visiting with our friends, meeting with our colleagues, attending meetings, workshops, and conferences, waiting in line at the store, waiting for the green light at the traffic stop, and even while driving!

In fact, holding cellphones has become like second nature to our hands, as we check the weather, the time, and our schedules on them. We take pictures and videos with them. We keep track of our kids and our diets with them. We do banking with them. We use them for maps and directions. They give us answers to any question we may have.

So, they go everywhere we go. To work, to school, to church. We even fall asleep with them in our hands. Putting down our cellphone is the last thing we do at night before we close our eyes to sleep, and reaching for it is the first thing we do in the morning when we get up. To be honest, I too have found myself doing all of these things. And I'm sure I am not alone. Perhaps, this is your confession this morning as well.

Continuous partial attention is dividing our time and hurting our focus. Indeed, it has become a serious social problem of our time. In a world that is more connected than ever before, that is always-on, 24/7, continuous partial attention contributes to a stressful lifestyle. We feel overstimulated and overwhelmed. We are so accessible and inaccessible, at the same time.

It's truly ironic. In an age where the most powerful technology the world has ever known is at our fingertips, a technology that allows us to stay better connected, more efficient and more productive than ever before, we feel instead more isolated and excluded. With the ever-growing volume of distractions right in front of our eyes, we find ourselves busier than ever before, yet less efficient and productive in our work. As a result, instead of feeling empowered and fulfilled, we are feeling increasingly powerless and empty.

In today's scripture reading, we find another person who was in that state - feeling overwhelmed and unfulfilled. Her name is Martha. When Jesus and his disciples came into her town, Martha welcomed them into her house and began to prepare food for them. She had a sister named Mary. But, Mary was in no hurry to come into the kitchen to help her sister. Instead, she sat down at the feet of their friend and guest and listened to him.

Imagine how busy Martha must have been, trying to cook for 13 men all by herself. She could not have been happy with her sister. She probably banged a few pots and slammed a few plates on the table to see if

Mary would get the hint. But, Mary would not come to help her. Finally, she had enough. She stormed into the room, and instead of talking to her sister, she exploded in frustration at Jesus.

Do you remember the leader of the synagogue whom we heard about last Sunday (Luke 13:10-17)? This is the way he behaved, too. He had an issue with Jesus who healed a woman on the Sabbath. But instead of talking to Jesus about it, he talked to the congregation and tried to stir up controversy. And here we have Martha doing the same thing!

Jesus said, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing...” It looks like being distracted by many things, continuous partial attention, is not only a problem of the Internet age. Perhaps, “it has been always with us, and just the causes of our inattention have altered.” (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3, p.267)

Martha’s problem is our problem. With continuous partial attention, we have allowed ourselves to be distracted by many things. We have forgotten what is the most important thing in our lives. We have replaced our time of being at the feet of Jesus with looking at the screens of our computers, laptops, tablets, and cell-phones. Even with our questions of faith, we turn to Google instead of God! We have lost our attention and focus on the one thing we need.

There was a time when I was at my first appointment that speaks to this. One Sunday morning, as usual, I was very busy, moving quickly to get ready for Sunday school and worship service. As I was about to open the front door to leave the parsonage, my husband who was quietly watching the news on TV, called me, “Wait, wait!” I turned around and said, “What?” I was feeling a bit irritated because I thought he was going to ask me to do something for him. He came over and gave me a hug. The hug probably took just for a few seconds, since he knew that I was in a hurry. But, it felt like an eternity. Being lost in the love of my husband, that precious moment is something I will always fondly remember. And it was possible only because I turned off all the distractions and allowed myself to be fully embraced by his arms, even for a brief moment.

Jesus said to 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.” And, this is true. When our hearts are not divided, when our minds are on the one thing that matters, we become truly alive to the presence of the kingdom of God which is at hand. It is when we are fully present to this reality that we are truly connected, truly empowered, and truly fulfilled.

In their book, *First Things First*, Stephen Covey and Roger and Rebecca Merrill ask this question: “What is the one activity that you know if you did superbly well and consistently would have significant positive results in your personal life?” They repeat the question for one’s professional and work life and ask their readers another question: “If you know these things would make such a significant difference, why are you not doing them now?”

Let me borrow their questions for matters of our faith. What is the one activity that you know if you did superbly well and consistently would have significant positive results in your spiritual life?

What is your equivalent of spending time at the Master’s feet? Is it prayer, morning devotion, reading the Bible, worship service, walking in the woods and enjoying God’s creation . . . ?

If you know this would make such a significant difference, why are you not doing it now?

May the words of Jesus Christ be a diagnosis for us, which leads us back to the present moment, the place we may encounter the kingdom of God. Let's hear them again, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing."

Amen.