

Loved Always Sermon Series

“We Are Busy”

Luke 14:15-24

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In our Lenten sermon series, we are remembering that we are loved by God *always*. So far, we’ve remembered that we are loved when we’re hungry, when we misunderstand, and when we perform.

What I hope you’ve been picking up along the way is that it’s not a *sin* to be hungry, or to misunderstand, or to perform. Those things are just part of being human, but because we are human, we are vulnerable to things – fears, insecurities, lies - that can cause us to drift away from God in those times without even realizing it.

If we are drifting, or have drifted, that’s what we want Jesus to show us as we follow him through Lent, and as we said the first week, the goal is not to try to fix ourselves through a spiritual improvement program. The goal is to listen and pay attention - to our hearts, to our lives, and to the Spirit within us – and to follow as the Spirit leads us to a place of deeper trust and greater intimacy with God. With all of that in mind, we turn this week to something else that is a common experience for many of us, and it’s this. We. Are. Busy.

I can honestly say that I can barely remember a time in my life when I wasn’t busy, and some of you might feel the same. As a child, I was busy with school, and church, and extracurricular activities. That carried on through middle school and high school, and work got added in at that point when I started working part-time jobs. Throughout college it was the same, and in seminary, most of the time I had at least 2 jobs on top of my classes. Nothing slowed down after

taking my first call as an Associate Pastor and then getting married and having children.

A few years ago, I saw a meme that perfectly described my own busy life and maybe it describes yours, too. It said, “Being a pastor is saying, ‘but after this week things will slow down,’ over and over until you die.” You can trade out the word pastor so that it says being a teacher, or being an adult, or even being retired, and the saying is still true. I hear some of you who are retired say you’re as busy or busier now than you ever were.

There are good things about being busy. As the saying goes, “idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” and staying busy can be a good way to stay out of trouble. It can also be evidence of responsibility. A person who is keeping up on things like working to pay the bills, and preparing meals to feed the family, and running children to school and appointments, and volunteering with church or in the community is a person who is being faithful to keeping commitments they’ve made. For others who have Type-A, go-getter personalities, being busy is just a natural expression of your personality. My husband is like this. He’s one of those people who doesn’t like to sit around doing nothing. He always has to be doing something.

So there can be good things about being busy, but I think we also know that it can wear us down. We can go, go, go to the detriment of our physical or mental health, and our relationships, and if busyness can interfere with our health and interpersonal relationships, it can also become an obstacle that interferes with our relationship with God. Even if we’re busy doing good things, it’s possible that our busyness can prevent us from receiving grace and spiritual blessings that God is eager to give to us. This is what we see in our Gospel text this morning.

In the passage, Jesus tells a story about someone who was hosting a great dinner banquet. It wasn't just a small dinner party with a simple home cooked meal like you might enjoy with friends or family members. If you imagine being invited to an impressive mansion where the host provides a multi-course meal of gourmet food served at the table by uniformed waitstaff, I think that is along the lines of what we're supposed to imagine when Jesus describes the great dinner the man was hosting. It was something special. It wasn't the kind of event that most people would hope to have an excuse for missing, and it was an honor to be invited.

So, the host sends his servant to announce to the guests that everything is ready and it's time to come enjoy the feast, but when he does, the guests, one by one, ask the servant to send their regrets. For each of them, something else had come up and they prioritized the something else over attending the dinner they were invited to.

Maybe they didn't realize what a big deal it was to be invited to the dinner, or maybe they did, but they hoped that the host would understand the reasons for sending their regrets. After all, they weren't just skipping out on the dinner to go goof off. The other things that they needed to attend to were important. Land, livestock, and a wife. These things were tied to their economic security and stability, and you can't just blow off that kind of responsibility to go enjoy yourself at a dinner party.

Responsible people can relate to that kind of thinking. We feel the need to work hard to take care of ourselves and to take care of the people that we love. We are busy because we *have* to be.

In a very real sense, it is true that we *have* to be busy. As the book of Proverbs says, "all hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty." A good work ethic is a sign of wisdom, but it's

also true that God didn't put us on this earth *only* to work or chase a profit. If that were true, God wouldn't have created the Sabbath for rest, and Jesus wouldn't have told us that life does not consist in the abundance of things. When God created humankind, yes, we were given responsibility and tasked with stewarding the earth. We were meant to work, and create, and do things, but we were also created for *relationship*, and we were made to have and enjoy a relationship with God first and foremost.

We know that human relationships are not sustained by busyness or productivity that take up all our time and energy. How many marriages have failed because one or both partners are always working and never have time to be together and invest in the relationship? How many children have felt that they have a parent who is a stranger because there is never time for their parent to stop working? Relationships are nurtured and sustained as we spend time simply enjoying presence and conversation – when maybe we aren't doing “useful” things like earning, or cleaning, or building, but instead we are eating food together around a table, or sitting in beach chairs by the ocean talking, or catching up with someone on the phone. This is how human relationships are nurtured and sustained, and our relationship with God works the same way.

The truth is that God wants to be with us just like the host in Jesus's parable desired the presence of his guests. He invited them because he wanted them to come and sit with him at his table. God wants to know us and be known by us, but that can't happen if we are never permitted or invited to rest from our busyness. God's invitation to the banquet - to come away and spend time with God - is the permission we need to set aside our busyness and attend to what matters most.

Now most of the time, if busyness is interfering with our relationship with God, we probably don't mean for it to be. In reality, we're probably like the guests in Jesus's story who said to the servant, "I can't come," while maybe thinking to themselves, "I'll be sure to go *next* time I'm invited." It's like the meme I quoted earlier. Life is just saying "after this week things will slow down" over and over until we die. We say this about our spiritual lives, too, and as Joshua said in his devotional, this is when our spiritual lives can begin to grow thin.

We say to ourselves things like this. When I have more time, I'll pray. When the schedule slows down, we'll get back to worship. After the project ends; when we get through the sports season; when things at work aren't so crazy; when I reach my salary goal; when I'm not so busy, *then* I will get back to investing in my relationship with God. We end up being like the people in the parable who may not have meant that they would *never* come to a dinner. They just wouldn't be coming to this one, but that has a way of turning into this one, and the next one, and the next one.

Admittedly, it can be very hard to prioritize things like prayer over deadlines and things that have a sense of urgency about them. Who has ever said to yourself, "I'll pray later. God will still be there after I write these emails?" God will be there, but the tragedy of constantly putting our relationship with God behind all the other things that we want or need to do is that we do miss out on something good that God wants to give to us.

That's what we see in Jesus's parable. He doesn't condemn the busy people, but his story does end with the host saying that none who were invited and refused will taste his dinner. They don't get to taste the fine food or get to experience the laughter and conversation around the table. They miss out on the chance to be lavished on by the host whose desire it was to delight them and satisfy their hunger

with the richest of feasts. When we choose again and again to prioritize everything ahead of a relationship with God, we also forfeit the grace, and the joy, and the closeness with God that could be ours.

Today some might be on the verge of burnout and you may most need to hear the good news that God does have a purpose and a plan for our lives that includes more than working and producing until we die. We were made to be loved and known by our Creator, or, as the Westminster Confession says, the chief end of our lives is to glorify God and *fully enjoy* God forever. Some of us need to be reminded that God gives us freedom and permission to rest and retreat into God's loving presence where we are cared for and sustained by grace.

Some of us may need to hear the challenge that comes to us through God's word today. Though we say our relationship with God is important, we've been putting anything and everything before God, and we can see that all our later's – "I'll pray later-" have turned into nevers. If we can see that that's true, maybe today is the day when we repent and re-prioritize so that our relationship with God is central in our lives again and not something that we give any leftover time and attention to.

And for some, maybe the most important thing that you need to hear today is the good news that God does want to be with you, and you are on the guest list for the banquet. If you aren't sure that God really does have an interest in you, and you don't feel confident that you are a person that God would want to have a relationship with, that could be a reason that you find yourself prioritizing everything else above the things that would allow you to draw closer to God. Staying busy and keeping God at arm's distance becomes a way to protect ourselves from the fear that if we actually came to the dinner, we would be rejected.

The host in the parable gives us a picture of how deeply God longs to be close to us. He invites, and when he is rejected, he keeps inviting, and inviting, and inviting without discrimination. You could say that that just makes him look like a desperate lonely person who can't get anyone to come to his party, but I think the host keeps inviting because he has so much goodness and love that he is ready to lavish on his guests, and he longs for them to come and enjoy what he wants to give to them.

We are invited and we have permission to step away from our busyness for long enough to enjoy the One who made us and loves us and wants to fill us with good things. God is big enough to hold and handle anything important while we pause, and we may find out that some of the things we let go of weren't as important as they seemed to be. Let's not miss the chance to feast on the riches of God's love. Amen.

