

Keeping Balance in Life
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Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church
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Those who have seen my office know that I have a lot of books to consult for writing sermons. I do use them, but this week I decided to start somewhere else. After reading the two scripture passages several times, I decided the common thread for this week is finding and maintaining balance in our lives. Of course, next week I might find a different unifying idea. I turned to that great theological tool, Google, and typed in "Finding balance in life." In $\frac{3}{4}$ of a second I got no fewer than 190,000,000 hits! 190 million ways of finding balance in my life...Wow! I'm sure they would all have been helpful, but I stopped after reading about eight of them. There were also some common themes running through those eight, but more about that later.

Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus had become friends of Jesus. It was clear that they knew each other well. When Lazarus became ill and died, Jesus wept at his tomb and then raised him from the dead. When Mary and Martha heard that Jesus was coming to stay with them, they were overjoyed, but they had completely different ways of showing it. Martha went into all-out homemaker hospitality mode. Jesus was an important guest and Martha wanted to 'wow' him with a fantastic meal. This was not a simple everyday meal. It was a work-intensive, exhausting meal. For those who have seen the movie, *Babette's Feast*, it was that type of meal – fussy to the max – absolute gourmet. Mary, also, wanted to extend the gift of hospitality. She wanted to attend his every need when he arrived, as did Martha. Mary's way of showing it was to be totally attentive. She made herself completely present to Jesus as he talked. Undoubtedly, Mary heard all that banging around in the kitchen and probably wished her sister, Martha, would settle down a bit. Where was she anyway? By closing herself away in the kitchen, she was ignoring their guest of honor. At the same time, Martha was working her fingers to the bone to create a perfect evening. Where was Mary? She wasn't a master chef like Martha, but at least she could be in the kitchen washing pots and pans as they went. Finally, Martha reaching the snapping point, and she confronted Mary in front of Jesus. Jesus response to Martha was, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing." In truth, both Mary and Martha had done some things that were right, but both were suffering from a lack of balance.

This familiar story from scripture has often been set aside as the difference between people who are mission-minded and those who are more interested in a life of piety. It

gives us an excuse to live an “either/or” type of life. There are those in churches that we label as ‘saints’ because they spend much time in prayer and scripture study. They seem to be so close to God. They are the people we go to when we ask for prayers. Then, there are the ‘saints’ who are always doing something for others. I would like to suggest that both of these ways of life lived to the extreme are not really helpful examples for us.

Think for a moment about those we recognize as saints. St. Paul, for example, was always on the go and regularly told people all that he was doing for the church and building up the kingdom. After describing to people how he was shipwrecked multiple times, regularly thrown in prison, and on occasion beaten, I can imagine that there were people who said, “If that is what it takes to be an insider, I’ll stay on the outside, thank you very much!” Or, what about St. Francis. We like St. Francis. We have blessings for our pets in October close to his feast day. Francis came from a wealthy family. His father, Pietro Bernadone, a silk merchant, became quite upset with him because he kept giving everything away to the poor. His father came back from travel once again to find that Francis had given away some of the family fortune and Pietro said it was not his to give away. There was a trial before the bishop. Francis decided to give back anything that was not solely his, and he would never again take money from his father. This included disrobing, handing his clothes to his father, and walking out of the bishop’s court stark naked. From then on, he dressed in a modest robe and lived his life for God and for the poor. These are not exactly poster children for how we would like to live our lives. While they did great and important things, they did not live balanced lives.

In the reading from Amos, we hear that the people have been living lives that hurt the poor and marginalized. In the minor prophets, God usually names the reasons the people might lose their freedom. It almost always has to do with not offering hospitality to the poor, to immigrants, or to others who are outsiders. God almost always tells the people, through the prophet, that the relationship between God and the Chosen Ones can be mended by, once again, offering hospitality and caring for the people on the edge. Today’s reading is from Chapter 8 of Amos, near the end of the book and near the end of God’s rope. There is no offer of restoration of relationship. Why is this? What did they do that was so terrible? Basically, God accuses the merchants of putting a thumb on the scale and selling the sweepings of the wheat – inferior product. In other words, they are cheating the poor, but isn’t that type of thing common in business? The people of Israel have lost the sense of balance in their treatment of others and their own wellbeing. Rabbi Heschel, in his well-known book, *The Prophet*, gives us good news even when it seems God would give up on our ability to change. “A change in [our] conduct brings about a change in God’s judgment. No word is God’s final word.”ⁱ

This sense of balance is twofold. We have to have balance in our individual lives and we need to have balance as a church. As we look to our founders, John and Charles Wesley, we see a sincere desire to be fully Christian, but also to balance a communal life with a means of accountability built in. Granted, there were those who saw their version of the practice of Christianity as a bit “over the top.” That is because the Anglican practice of the day tended to be so far “*under* the top.” When Charles asked John to lead their student group at Oxford, they were accused of being Bible moths, Bible bigots and Supererogation Men – as well as derisively being called Methodists. You may not know the term “supererogation,” but it means those who go far beyond what is expected or required of them. You should probably know that Charles did not start his college career with this great religious zeal. He said he didn’t want to become “a saint all at once.” He was described as having “more genius than grace.” In other words, he hit the Oxford scene as a bit of a party boy. However, it wasn’t long before Charles pulled together a group of friends, which he invited John to lead along with him. They started off meeting every Sunday evening, then two evenings in every week, and finally every evening for three hours. They studied the Bible together, reviewed the work of the past day, and talked about their plans for the next day. They ended the evening with a frugal supper. The “work” they talked about was visiting people in debtor’s prison, visiting the sick, educating children, and other activities based around the care for people’s needs. As United Methodists, it is a part of our very being to build our relationship with God through prayer and study and to care for others through acts of mercy and justice.

When we look at the Wesleys, we see two men who gave their lives to loving God and neighbor, and by spreading the Good News of God’s love through preaching and service to others. It may seem as though they lost their balance – especially John. Remember, though, John and Charles were both priests in the Church of England until they died. This was their life’s work. They had more reasonable expectations of the people in the bands and societies of the people called Methodists. Those expectations were summed up in the General Rules: First of all, do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.

Now, let’s fast forward to our time and that great theological research tool, Google. Think of the past week. How much time did you spend running to try to catch up with yourself. Working long hours and still not getting everything done. For those with children, how much breathless running around did you do that really did not end up providing quality time with your kids? How much time did you spend answering communications on your smart phone? How much time did you spend walking around playing Pokemon Go? (I hope not too many have joined that obsession, though I have

some friends who seem to have gone wild with it). How much time did you spend this week that you can neither account for or claim as time spent reviving and renewing yourself?

In looking at the Google hits on finding balance in life, there is one thing that was consistent as a need: we need to create space for ourselves. That can come in many ways. We can unplug – turn off the phone, take an evening without sending a single text, silence the noise of our lives. In other words, take some time to get in touch with yourself and with your family. Do something you really love. Spend time with a friend or your spouse or your children simply connecting. It really won't hurt. The world will still be there waiting for you in the morning.

I heard a show on NPR this week where they were talking with young adults who never disconnect. They do not take vacation time, even though they've earned it. If they do take vacation, they are still responding to email and texts that are work-related. Even though research shows that time spent recharging is important and actually improves the quality of work, they feel they can't afford to step away.

The great preacher Fred Craddock used to tell this story:

I read something recently – I knew this, but I had forgotten about it – that years ago our ancestors used to go out walking, usually on a Sunday afternoon – sometimes alone, sometimes couples, sometimes the whole family – and they called it “going marveling.” Marveling. They would look for unusual rocks, unusual flowers, shells, four-leafed clovers, marvelous things. They would collect them, bring them back to the house, and show off the marvelous things they had found. Isn't that a delightful thing, to go marveling?

When I read that and was reminded of that, I went marveling myself. You know I live about a mile from here; if you walk down the railroad, it's about a mile. So I left the house and went marveling. About a mile away I came upon a pavilion, and inside I saw a lot of people singing, praying, and reading scripture, sharing their love for each other. They were vowing that they would – they promised to each other, and they promised to God – make every effort, God help them, to reproduce the life of Jesus in this place. And I marveled, how I marveled. And I said to myself, *Look what I have found, right here, in this little building.*ⁱⁱ

I love this story of Dr. Craddock's. Look what we have right here in this big building. Stop for a moment and marvel with me. We have people coming to bake muffins and make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for hungry people. We have people making a meal and transporting it to a downtown church to share. We have youth going to rebuild

houses and lives in Appalachia. We have Sunday School children learning the stories of our faith. We have people of all ages coming together to learn about and to pray and praise God. We have women knitting prayer shawls to remind people that we care, knitting and crocheting hats and gloves. We have people meeting to make sure our library has resources to build our spiritual lives. We offer our very best back to God through the gift of music. We have people who sit after services and drink coffee while sharing their lives with neighbors. We have people supporting the great missionary work of Paul Webster in Africa. We don't take enough time to stop the noise and marvel about what is happening in our own backyard, let alone our church. We all have characteristics of Mary and Martha, of Paul and St. Francis, of John and Charles. This week, may we be mindful of our need to balance the many elements of our lives and occasionally to simply stop and go marveling. Amen.

ⁱ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 1962), 247.

ⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock, ed. Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 65.