



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -  
August 13, 2017 Sermon

---

## Focusing the Distracted Self

Psalm 121, Luke 10:38-42

Sometimes, when I set to thinking about the various activities of human beings, the dangers and troubles which they face in politics, or in war, giving rise to so many quarrels and passions, daring and often wicked enterprises and so on; I have often said the the sole cause of human unhappiness is that we . . . **[the rest of the quotation will be provided during the sermon]**—Blasie Pascal (1623-1662), *Pensées*.

Our second Scripture Lesson is the story of Mary and Martha. It may be familiar to you, but I want to work against that familiarity. This story has been the focus of many a women's retreat, but men, this story is for us, too. You may also think it's story about the fair—or unfair—distribution of household chores. Think again: it's about Mary being focused on what really matters and Martha being distracted by what matters less. Finally, when this story is presented, the question is often asked "So are you more like Mary or Martha?" Wrong question: In our world today, we're all like Martha—we're all distracted. So with all that contrariness in mind, listen now for God's word, reading from Luke chapter 10 verses 38-42:

*Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are concerned about, 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."*

The Word of the Lord.

*Sometimes, when I set to thinking about the various activities of human beings, the dangers and troubles which they face in politics, or in war, giving rise to so many quarrels and passions, daring and often wicked enterprises and so on; I have often said that the sole cause of human unhappiness is that we . . .*

**Stop there!** What do you think comes next? If you haven't looked at the front of your bulletin, go ahead and do it now. The quotation is from Pascal which, yes, is the name of a computer programming language, and yes, is also the name of a scientific unit of measurement, but first was the surname of Blaise Pascal, a Frenchman who lived almost 400 years ago, who was a child prodigy, and became a renowned mathematician and scientist (hence the computer programming language and unit of measurement named in his honor) while he was still a teenager.

Pascal was raised a Catholic but undergoes something of a second conversion at the age of 31, and thereafter allies himself with a devout group of dissenting Catholics in France, who, while still faithful to the church, were nonetheless critical of many of its practices, and thereby frequently fell under suspicion of Protestantism.

Writing at the beginning of what historians (taking the long view) like to call the "modern age" (as opposed to ancient or medieval), Pascal is seen as something of a prophet of that age, anticipating the ways of thinking, the overall outlook, the tone and tenor, even some of the besetting distractions and anxieties of modernity.

The quotation on your bulletin is from his book *Pensées*, or "Thoughts" which was really his personal notebook, and consists of a number of epigrams—from one-liners to verbal sketches to extended meditations—on religious and philosophical subjects. Many of these are well-known and still quoted today (Pascal is sometimes more quoted than read) but perhaps the most famous is "The Memorial" which is his account of his conversion, and which he had sewn into the lining of all his jackets so that it would always be close to his heart. It reads in part:

*Fire: God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars.  
Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ.  
Greatness of human soul: joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.  
I have cut myself off from him: Let me not be cut off from him for ever.  
Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ.  
I have cut myself off from him, shunned him, denied him, crucified him.  
Let me never be cut off from him.  
Sweet and total renunciation. Total submission to Jesus Christ.  
Everlasting joy. I will not forget thy word. Amen.*

So that's Pascal, and yes, I admit it, leaving the quotation incomplete is a shameless teaser—I wanted to get your attention. So, now that I have it:

*Sometimes, when I set to thinking about the various activities of human beings, the dangers and troubles which they face in politics, or in war, giving rise to so many quarrels and passions, daring and often wicked enterprises and so on; I have often said that the sole cause of human unhappiness is that we . . .*

How do you think Pascal completes his thought? Perhaps with some church doctrine? You know: the sole cause of human unhappiness is that we . . . born into sin, disobey God, suffer from pride and excessive desires.

Or perhaps by denouncing worldliness? The sole cause of human unhappiness is that we . . . seek our own power and glory in the kingdoms of this world and not the power and glory of God and God's kingdom?

Or perhaps with something spiritual? The sole cause of human unhappiness is that we . . . don't pray and love—and therefore, live—as we ought? No, no, and no. So what does he say? Let me read it to you:

*Sometimes, when I set to thinking about the various activities of human beings, the dangers and troubles which they face in politics, or in war, giving rise to so many quarrels and passions, daring and often wicked enterprises and so on; I have often said the the sole cause of human unhappiness is that we . . . are unable to live—for even five minutes—without Twitter, social media, our smartphones, or the internet.*

I told you: he was a prophet of the modern age. OK, OK, he wasn't quite that specific in his prophecy, but he was a prophet. What did he say then?

*Sometimes, when I set to thinking about the various activities of human beings, the dangers and troubles which they face in politics, or in war, giving rise to so many quarrels and passions, daring and often wicked enterprises and so on; I have often said the the sole cause of human unhappiness is that we . . . do not know how to stay quietly in our rooms.*

*We do not know how to stay quietly in our rooms. That* is the sole cause of all our unhappiness: Which, when you think about it, amounts to the same thing as being unable to live—for even five minutes—without Twitter, social media, our smartphones, or the internet.

What's wrong with us? Pascal has an answer to that question: we're vulnerable. He writes:

*Imagine any situation you like, add up all the blessings with which you could be endowed, being king, for example. Yet if you imagine someone with all the advantages of this position, but no means of distraction, left to ponder and reflect on what he is, this **limp happiness** will not keep him going: he is bound to start thinking of all the threats facing him, of possible revolts, finally of inescapable death and disease.*

We're vulnerable—to all kinds of things, at any moment, from the imperceptible microbe to fire and fury like the world has never seen, to an unimaginable multitude of things in between. We're vulnerable. Anything can get us at any moment. And even if nothing gets us at this particular moment, we're still mortal—death and disease will get us soon enough, and we know it. So what do we do? We distract ourselves . . . constantly. The last thing we would want to do would be to sit quietly in our rooms (or anywhere else for the matter) without our electronic devices, to ponder and reflect on our vulnerability.

And of course anything can serve as a distraction, it doesn't have to be electronic. Pascal talks about the distractions of his day:

*This is why gambling and hunting, some absorbing show, games and parties, war and high office, the National Football League and Game of Thrones—are all so popular. People need some novel and agreeable passion to keep them busy . . . something that takes their minds off of our predicament, something that distracts us.* (OK, that part about the National Football League and *Game of Thrones* was me, not Pascal)

Now at this point, you may be thinking that Pascal, for all his scientific, mathematical, and philosophical acumen, was a kind of morose killjoy—you know, someone who's opposed to all fun on principle and exhibits a Woody-Allen-like obsession with death. But that's not true. Listen to what Pascal says:

*It's wrong to blame people for their distractions; they are not wrong to want them—if they only wanted them for the sake of distraction. The trouble is that they want them as though, once they had the things they seek, they could not fail to be truly happy. This shows that neither the critics of distractions nor those they criticize understand our human predicament.*

So what is our human predicament? Pascal, answers that question by quoting St. Augustine, "Our hearts are restless, God, until they rest in you." Or as Pascal himself glossed that famous line: "there's an empty place inside each of us, that only God can fill."

We were meant for God—everything about us reflects God's glory: as the Psalmist says, we are fearfully and wonderfully made. And yet we have fallen from that glory: that glory is neither fully present in us nor immediately accessible to us. So, we are, in Pascal's word, "wretched." "Wretched," in that we were made for that true, glorious happiness—we have both the vestiges of, and especially the yearning for, that original glory—but we cannot attain it, at least not by our own devices, electronic or otherwise.

So we distract ourselves trying to fill up the empty place inside. And again, anything can serve as a distraction. It doesn't have to be electronic devices or even leisure pastimes. For many of us, work serves as a distraction—we stay *so busy* with it; oh yes, we complain about it, but secretly—and we may even keep it secret from ourselves—we want to be that busy precisely so we don't have to think about other things.

And just as anything can serve as a distraction, anyone can use distractions as a way of not thinking about our human predicament and our need for God. Yes, even pastors. Not me, of course: I'm completely spiritual, 100% focused on God, every waking—and sleeping—minute. But I have this friend—he's a pastor and a big baseball fan, he plays fantasy baseball online—and I swear to you, he can spend *hours—days*—completely absorbed in his computer, searching for a backup shortstop for his fantasy team, as if all his happiness—no, as if his very life—depended on it. A pastor! So I have to ask you: Why, oh why . . . does Zack Cozart keep getting hurt?

Anything can serve as a distraction, and anyone can be distracted. But Pascal was a prophet of our modern world, and he recognized that, in the modern world, human ingenuity would create more and more ubiquitous, more and more seductive and and more and more addictive devices for our distraction.

"Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" so asks the psychologist Jean Twenge, in a piece in this September's *Atlantic* magazine. As you might have surmised, her answer is "Yes." Identifying those born between 1995 and 2012 as the "iGen," she argues that "the twin rise of the smartphone and social media has caused an earthquake of a magnitude we've not seen in a very long time, if ever. There is compelling evidence that the devices we've placed in young people's hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy."

I read this article on my phone, of course. And what's the advantage of the World Wide Web if not immediate access to more and more distract . . . er, information? So I went to JSTOR Daily, an online a publication that "contextualizes current events," and found a piece by Alexandra Samuel, critiquing Twenge's piece (Before I went there I stopped to see whether Cozart was off the Disabled List—not yet). Anyway, Samuel argues that the problem is not in our children, but in ourselves. "If our kids are increasingly disengaged," she writes, "it's because

we've disengaged ourselves; we're too busy looking down at our screens to look up at our kids." (Graham asked me a question at this point, but I can't remember what it was.) And then Samuel brings it all home with this indictment: "If we've let smartphones run roughshod over our lives, it's not just because they offer respite from our annoying children, but because they offer respite from our annoying selves."

In other words, the sole cause of human unhappiness is that we don't know how to stay quietly in our rooms. Which brings us back to Mary and Martha.

It's not that household chores—and all the other tasks of daily life—don't need to be done; they do. It's not that the fair allotment of those tasks doesn't matter; it does. But the story of Mary and Martha is not about those things; it's about Mary being focused on what really matters and Martha being distracted by what matters less. And what really matters? Well, if our hearts are restless until they rest in God, if there is an empty place inside that only God can fill, then if God is with us, then that's the thing—the only thing—that matters. "Martha, Martha, you are concerned about, 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 of course we're no different from Mary and Martha—God is with us in Jesus Christ. No, he's not stopping by as a houseguest, but in the Bible, in prayer, in worship, in baptism and communion, in the life of the church, in friendship and family and community, in the beauty, wisdom, and goodness of our world—all through the work of the Holy Spirit—God is with us in Jesus Christ. And so we can begin to find peace and rest; and so the empty places inside of us can begin to be filled. And when that does begin to happen, it means that our distractions are no longer distractions—at least not in the negative, obsessive sense. Instead, they become what they were meant to be: pleasures, pastimes, occupations, jobs, tasks, hobbies, interests, activities—and most important, they begin to find their proper places in our lives. It's a process, of course, with lots of ups and downs and some struggle, with discipline always needed, but less so with time. The key point, however, is this: when, like Mary, we begin to acknowledge the one thing we need, when we choose the better part, as Mary did, then we can begin to enjoy this world and live in it as we were meant to.

Of course, that leads right to the big question: Is Pascal right in what he says about our human predicament: is it true that we cannot be happy without God? Is it true that the things of this world, if we pursue them as ultimate goods, will never satisfy us, and thereby will become distractions in the negative, obsessive sense? Well, here's where Pascal's gift for proving things (remember: scientist and mathematician) comes in. He can prove this point with elegance and simplicity: "Just look at us," he asks, "look at us—look at yourself—when we pursue distractions obsessively, as if all our happiness—as if our very lives—depended on them, are we happy—truly and lastingly happy—then?"

Jean Twenge has an answer to that question: our modern distracting devices are making our children "seriously unhappy." And despite disagreeing on whether the fault lies in our children or in ourselves, Alexandra Samuel agrees on the larger point: we allow our smartphones to run roughshod over our lives, and in the end, we find no respite, we find only . . . our restless, annoying selves. It is, at best, a limping happiness.

Pascal was a prophet of our modern world. But along with his prophetic word, he also offered a word of hope:

*Fire: God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars.*

*Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ.*

*Greatness of human soul: joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.*

*I have cut myself off from him: Let me not be cut off from him for ever.*

*Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ.*

*I have cut myself off from him, shunned him, denied him, crucified him.*

*Let me never be cut off from him.*

*Sweet and total renunciation. Total submission to Jesus Christ.*

*Everlasting joy. I will not forget thy word. Amen.*

May we too keep this always close to our hearts. May we too find the same true and lasting and glorious happiness. May we too find the one thing needed that will never be taken away. May God so focus our distracted selves. Amen.