

West Valley Church
Dan & April Manning
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LOVE GOD
LOVE PEOPLE
The Most Important Thing

April gives short description of video and a brief overview of time in Ireland.

In the year of 2015, Dan and I spent 11 months as student missionaries serving in the British Isles through Nazarene Theological Seminary's 365 Days in Mission program. Dan was serving in Scotland, and I was serving in the Republic of Ireland. We both had different experiences, as we experienced different cultures and as we both served in different ministry settings. Dan served as a youth ministry intern at Trinity Church of the Nazarene in Perth Scotland and I served with two Nazarene missionary families, the Morleys and the Voigts, who were actually pastoring at Richland Nazarene prior to becoming missionaries in the community of Wicklow Town, Ireland, situated right along the Irish Sea about an hour south of Dublin.

As I entered my ministry and cultural setting, I brought along my high-functioning, type A, and time-oriented personality. What I learned, however, was the importance of letting all that go and learning about how to be present, how to minister right where you are, in your community focused on a ministry of presence and being okay with not constantly doing something, but being okay with spending time building genuine, authentic relationships with others. Some examples the video showed included helping with a parent and toddler playgroup on Friday mornings, meeting at cafes with friends for coffee, a scone or a full Irish breakfast, and learning how to quilt and crochet from the local Irish women.

Dan:

Our time in the British Isles was quite the learning experience. The language, for example, took some time to learn. The language in the British Isles is English of course, but not the English we are accustomed to. The words we have developed here, take on a different meaning. I remember one morning early on in my year; I had made some coffee for myself. My host mother, seeming surprised at how self-sufficient I was, asked how I made the coffee, noticing the distinct scent of fresh coffee, over the traditional instant. I told her that I had used the French press. I turned around to see the horrified face of my mother, gasping "you did what?" Fearing that I had used an ancient family heirloom or something that I was not supposed to use, I frantically pointed towards the French press drying on the rack next to the sink. "Oh! The cafetiere!" she exclaimed, grasping her chest in relief. "Son" she lovingly called me in my year, "In old Scottish, a press is a cupboard. I thought you were telling me you had made coffee using a French cupboard!"

April:

Our time was a learning experience for sure, and the most important thing we learned from those experiences with others was that ministry is a ministry of presence that takes place outside of the church building. Instead of waiting for others to walk through the doors of the church, what is needed is for the church to go out and be exemplars of Christ in their communities. One passage that spoke to us throughout our year was:

Luke chapter 10 verses 38 through 42. The passage reads:

“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 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.”

Dan:

Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and Jesus had a close relationship. Martha spoke to Jesus like an old friend or family member when Jesus was late to save Lazarus. Jesus wept and mourned over the loss of his close friend. Jesus remained good friends with these siblings after raising Lazarus, and in this passage, we see that when Jesus visits them.

The passage starts with “now as they...” Who is the *they*? Definitely the 12 disciples but they could also be the 70 others that Jesus had sent out earlier, who had returned to report to Jesus. Either way, there were a lot or an insane amount of people at this house. Martha took it upon herself to be the host of this impromptu event, preparing meals, tables, possibly lodging, and there was a lot to do to make sure these guests were comfortable.

Mary on the other hand, was focusing on Jesus. Mary was at the Lord’s feet. In the original Greek, it says Mary *also* was sitting at the Lord’s feet, which indicates Mary was not the only one not helping Martha but instead listening to Jesus’s teaching alongside a group of others.

Jesus’s teaching might have been continuing the conversation he had in the passage before this one, which was the parable of the Good Samaritan, a discussion of “who is my neighbor, who should I be loving?” Mary was right up, close to Jesus, listening to his every word along with the others who had accompanied Jesus and those who were in the household.

Martha, who previously spoke to Jesus shrewdly, like a close friend or sibling, when Lazarus died, asked Jesus to tell Mary to help her with the many preparations. Jesus responded almost the same way as he did when he raised Lazarus by telling Martha he is the most important thing to be worried about, that the messiah is the most important thing you can focus on, which is the “good portion” he says Mary has chosen.

One commentary author suggests that Martha was focused on being a good hostess, while Mary was focused on being a good disciple. Mary was at the feet of Jesus with the others

who came with Jesus. Mary was shoulder to shoulder with those who had been traveling and learning from Jesus.

This position, at the feet of a leader, is a position of learning, often portrayed in rabbi and student's situations. And that position of learning was traditionally held by men, which would have added to Martha's confusion and frustration as her sister assumed the position of a man in deep biblical training, instead of the position of a woman, preparing the home. Jesus has no issue with Mary taking this position, learning the most important lessons he had to offer right alongside those who have been studying and training with Jesus on their journey.

Now what Jesus doesn't say is that the rest of Martha's tasks are meaningless. Jesus states that the focus on him as messiah is most important. Martha felt the urgency to meet the needs of her guests when Jesus was meeting the needs of everyone's eternity. Martha was focused on the things she could do for the guests, how she could make them comfortable, which is reasonable when you think about the situation. I think I too would feel 'overburdened,' 'distracted,' with the preparations and block out anything else that would get in the way of getting the food prepared and making sure the house is clean.

Martha's tasks were important, just as they are today, providing for yourself is important, making sure you have food, clothes and a place to sleep is important. But we run into trouble when we focus on and believe that we are the ones providing it, when really God is the one providing all that we need.

That doesn't mean we stop working, God works through our work, but what that means is that we need to take opportunities to reflect on what God has done and what God is doing in our lives and through our lives. The issue Jesus has with Martha is that she is focused on what she can provide, instead of what Jesus came to provide.

April:

For the first couple of months, I too was focused on what Martha was focused on: what I can provide. I struggled to find ways to really immerse myself in the community, which was my ministry setting. It was difficult because I didn't know how to minister without talking about the Bible, talking about God, or participating in some type of black and white ministry program. I desired to minister to others, but I felt like I wasn't. Although I was stationed at the kids craft table during our Friday's playgroup, and even though I was helping my mentor with teaching Bible stories to kids through a resource called "Godly Play," I wasn't the main teacher. My duty was being the "doorperson," which consisted of welcoming the kids to class, making sure the kids were paying attention and helping them get supplies during craft time. I felt like I was barely contributing anything. I was just doing a 'task.'

However as I talked about my frustration with my mentor, Sarah, I gained a new perspective. She helped me realize it's not a question of "what can I do?" but a question on "how can I participate with God in Wicklow Town, in the work God has already set in motion, even long before I arrived?" I began to ask myself what gifts do I have that I can bring and use to further God's work in Wicklow? As my perspective shifted from me to God,

I began to see things more clearly. I began to meet more regularly with my two Irish friends, Aimee and Lauren, I started to really invest in relationships with my quilting and knitting ladies, and I started to invest in the children who came to Godly Play. Instead of seeing my tasks as mundane, I took a new perspective and approach. Instead of letting the kids enter the room right away, I made them pause at the doorway.

I got down on eye-level with the kids and asked each child by name if they were ready to enter the room and hear what God would have to say to them that day. When I asked one little boy if he was ready, this boy grew a huge smile on his face and excitedly said, "Yes!" That moment spoke to me that the intention behind the things you do play an important part in ministry, and from then on, I really focused in on what God was doing in Wicklow and how I could participate, focused on God, in every little thing I did.

The work Martha was doing was not bad, in fact, hospitality glorifies God, but it was her mindset of focusing solely on the tasks and what she can do instead of who Jesus is and what He came to do that was flawed. Work is good, providing for yourself, or for a family is good. But we are called to glorify and recognize God in all that we do, in every situation.

This is also addressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable of the Good Samaritan focuses on loving neighbor, and our passage today focuses on loving God. These are the two greatest commandments that Jesus notes in Matthew 22:37-39:

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

I am convinced that the parable of the Good Samaritan isn't a question of who, but a question of when. When should I love my neighbor? Jesus' response is at every given moment, when the opportunity presents itself. When the two priests that went down the road before the Good Samaritan passed by the broken man, they did so with the intent of completing their work. They could be late to preach a sermon, lead a service or attend any other religious function. Stopping to help the man would make them unclean and unable to do their job. Stopping would also have slowed them down, as the man needed urgent care, and taking care of him would have prevented them from making the service they needed to conduct. It would have prevented them from doing their job. The teacher of the law that asked Jesus "who is my neighbor" knew exactly who his neighbor was, which is why Jesus responded with an answer that better describes when to love your neighbor.

The same is for the passage of Jesus visiting Martha and Mary; the situation doesn't consist of what way to focus on God, but *to* focus on God in every opportunity as it presents itself. Martha was focusing on hospitality, focusing on the work that needed to be done to provide for the guests. This in itself isn't bad; the Bible tells us to be hospitable, to love our neighbor as ourselves. But we must be hospitable and do our work in the mindset of glorifying God. Martha was focusing on what she could provide, all while Jesus was teaching the ways of everlasting life, what He provided for us, which is why he responds to Martha that Mary has chosen the good portion and doesn't ask her to leave.

Dan:

We often get caught up in the same way Martha did, focusing on our own work or what we can provide, instead of recognizing the opportunity to learn from God or glorify God. I was actually guilty of this in Scotland. I attended a highland games, a Scottish Olympics of sorts, early on in the year, around March or April. At the end of the games, I was sitting on a stage platform that had hosted the dancing competitions of the day, watching the end of the shotput event. An older man named Bill sat down beside me and we began to talk. I asked him about Perth and how long he has lived here, what has changed over the years and so on. I then asked him if he attended a church. He looked at me with a bewildered look, and said no. In America, we are quite accustomed to inviting our friends and neighbors to our church, and I did just that. I told him about Trinity church of the Nazarene and I told him where it was located and what kind of things they did there. Bill promptly stood up, and exclaimed, "I haven't any time for church!" and left, and I never saw Bill again. I hadn't considered the post Christian environment I was now in. The year before I arrived in Scotland, a census was taken, and less than 1% of the population of Scotland registered as evangelical Christian, and I was now experiencing that culture in this moment with Bill. I don't know why Bill sat next to me, but I now know that he wasn't looking for a place to go to church. Bill was looking for someone to talk with.

This story haunts me to this day, and I remain filled with regret. Because what if my last question to Bill wasn't which church he went to, but asking him to meet me for a cup of coffee. Where would our relationship be now? How would God have used that relationship? I did not recognize the opportunity to focus on God and the relationships that God values, I was only thinking of my duties as a missionary, and I missed out because of it, just like Martha missed out.

I took what I learned from my encounter with Bill and applied it to my presence in my community for the rest of the year. I volunteered with a ministry that would provide a hot meal on Thursday nights for those in need. The focus of the ministry wasn't getting people fed and taken care of, but making sure people were heard and loved.

I would join the same table of guys every week, and they quickly became dear friends. I would miss them when they didn't arrive on a Thursday, and they would fill me in on their happenings the next time we met. If I were to be absent, I would get a note from the ministry director, letting me know they asked about me. Our conversations varied widely, from sports to family life, to where we were from and where we would like to go.

They picked up my accent right away and asked what I was doing. And I gave them my answer, so they knew what I was in Scotland to do, but I had learned a different way to do it. I evangelized by being with people, not next to them or around them, but with them. I was with many people during their struggles and times of grief, and with them during their joy. I was with them because God was with them, and the best opportunity to present the Gospel comes from time spent building a relationship with someone, caring for someone, loving someone.

That is what drove my ministry in Scotland and what drives my ministry here in Yakima.

April:

In everything we do here at West Valley Church, we do with intentionality, with purpose, with a focus on what God is up to in our community. We're always looking and evaluating how we can be a presence of Christ to our community. The partnership with Wide Hollow and Mountainview Elementary Schools are great ways we're being Christ. We also just finished a season of Upward Soccer, which had an amazing impact on our community. I had never seen so many people attend a Saturday soccer game as I saw here these past two months. And what's great is that the soccer may drive the kids here, but they keep coming weekly because of the relationships they're building with our coaches and kids. Even the parents find time to interact with one another as their children practice. What it does is foster community, foster relationships, foster time to really extend Christ and love our neighbors. Passages like Jesus visiting Martha and Mary remind us to focus on what is most important, to keep our minds on Christ, in every little thing and mundane task you do, loving God and loving neighbor.