

“Keeping Awake”

Fourth in a Series: The Faith Community I Long for

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Script: Amos 8:1-12; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

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Fred Craddock tells of ministering in his first parish in Southwest Oklahoma, Custer City, population 450 on a good day. There were four churches in town; a Methodist Church, a Baptist Church, a Nazarene Church, and Christian Church. Each church had their share of the population on Wednesday night, Sunday morning and evening. Each had a small collection of young people, and the attendance rose and fell according to the weather and whether it was time to harvest the wheat.

But the most consistent attendance in town was at the little café where all the pickup trucks were parked, and where all the men inside discussing the weather, and the cattle, and the wheat bugs, and the hail, and the wind, and if they were going to have a crop. All of their wives and sons and daughters were in one of those four churches. The Churches either had good attendance or poor attendance, but the cafe had consistently good attendance. They were always there. Once in a while they would lose a member there at the café, because their wives finally got to them, or their kids, and you'd see them go sheepishly off to one of the churches. But the men at the cafe still felt strong. And so on they went, Wednesday evenings, Sunday mornings and evenings, and every other day, discussing the weather and crops— not bad men, but good men, family men, hard working men.

The patron saint of the group was a man named Frank. He was 77, a good man, strong man, farmer and rancher, prospering cattle man also. He was born in a sod house. AOI Frank will never go to Church@ Fred tells of meeting Frank on the street one day. He knew Fred was a preacher, and he was simply shaking hands with Frank and visiting with him when Frank when on the offensive.

“I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business. Far as I’m concerned, everything else is fluff.”

He was telling Fred, “Leave me alone, I’m not a prospect.” So Fred didn’t bother Frank and that was why he was so surprised, and the café men were dumbfounded, when Frank presented himself for Baptism. Pastor Fred baptized him. Talk around town was that “Frank must be sick. Guess he’s scared to meet his maker...”

Talking with Frank the next day, Fred said, “Uh, Frank, you remember the little saying you used to give me so much: “I work hard, I take care of my family, and I mind my own business”?”

“Yeah, I remember I said that a lot.”

“Do you still say that?”

“Yeah.”

Fred: “Then what’s the difference?”

He said, **“I didn’t know then what my business was.”**

2

What *is* our business? We all know people like ‘Ol Frank who deny their need for a living connection with God. We are all “Franks” at various stages of our lives. Yet there comes a point, hopefully, when we begin to see what our true business is in this life; relating to our creator God.

Last week’s Scripture was the Good Samaritan story, with its powerful message that our business is to care take for *all* whom we meet along the road of life. The action of this despised outsider was praised. Jesus told the Lawyer and indirectly all of us, “Go and do likewise.” Then, immediately after that story, as if to recognize the danger in thinking that serving is the only important thing, Luke offers the story of Mary and Martha.

Jesus’ entourage probably consisted of seventy-plus followers. We know that some wealthy women funded the operation and we can assume that they also did the bulk of the day to day work. When I have time, I love to cook or bake. I love the whole process of choosing a recipe, gathering the ingredients, and seeing if I can pull something together on the stove and share it with others. My family can tell you that sometimes my efforts don’t come together too well. The peanut butter soufflé was not a big hit. In the ancient Mediterranean culture, these tasks were solely the responsibility of women. Martha was doing her part to support the cause. Distracted by all her duties, she becomes annoyed with her sister Mary and tries to triangle Jesus into scolding her. Jesus, in turn, scolds Martha & praises Mary. Service is good, but it must be after we know God’s will. This is the necessary thing, not to work harder, but smarter. Our “business” is to have a heart, soul and mind connected with the will of the Lord of the universe before we put our strength to it.

For me, the whole issue in this wonderful story (that is a lived-out parable) is not about the contrast between productivity and relationships, or practices and presence, duty and love, the active life of service and the contemplative life... between doing and being, as much as it is about distraction and attention. **“Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only *one thing*.”** Attention. Wakefulness. As we go about our Good Samaritan tasks, can we be attentive? Can we be mindful, as we do our activities or as we sit at Jesus’ feet? That is one of the challenges of the spiritual life.

This congregation lists as one of its Vision Priorities, **“*Spirituality*—Nourish individuals in Biblical faith and Christian spirituality in a way that strengthens and transforms personal lives and this faith community.”** Our Minnesota Annual Conference has chosen to focus upon the mandate to create “Spiritually Vital Congregations” and reach out to new people. In order for us to be spiritually vital, attention is central. Attuned always to God’s Spirit and call, we center ourselves in the life-flow of that strength in order to reach out in our service— our loving actions. That is the message of Jesus for Martha and us. It begins with paying attention to our spirits and God’s. It begins with listening to God’s still voice within our souls and God’s voice within Scripture. It is easy to be distracted by worries and many things. As a congregation we must attend to God’s will and spirit, as you have been in the Visioning work you’ve done in these last three years.

As I share with you the things I long for in a faith community this summer, one of the most important is that vital spiritual center. I long for a place that truly attends to God in its daily

life— listening in its spiritual practices and worship. I long for a place that helps me attend, to listen to God.

Don Saliers, a Jazz musician, and authority on Christian worship and liturgy, worships here on occasion when he's out at St. John's for retreat. I love his suggestion that worship is our chance to, as he puts it, "rehearse the affections of the Christian life." His sense is that in worship we get to practice the central movements of our souls, so that we can do our true worship in the world. And so we think and pray and ponder here on Sundays things like forgiveness, grace, generosity, love, risking ourselves, peace, surrender, faith-leaps, and extending our focus to the world's needs. We consider awe and wonder, thankfulness, courage, and patience, so that when we confront an occasion this week we've rehearsed it before hand. I long for a place where worship is such rehearsal. Where it is fun, engaging, transformative, creative, substantive. I long for a place where my whole self is involved (heart and mind). A place where I don't have to check-out my mind and questioning— even doubts before I enter. I genuinely sense that this is such a place.

Frederick Buechner some thoughts on worship. Please excuse his male-exclusive language in reference to God.

Phrases like *Worship Service* or *Service of Worship* are tautologies. To worship God *means* to serve him. Basically there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for him that he needs to have done—run errands for him, carry messages for him, fight on his side, feed his lambs, and so on. The other way is to do things for him that you need to do— sing songs for him, create beautiful things for him, give things up for him, tell him what's on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in him and make a fool of yourself for him the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love.

A Quaker Meeting, a Pontifical High Mass, the Family Service at First Presbyterian, a Holy Roller Happening— unless there is an element of joy and foolishness in the proceedings, the time would be better spent doing something useful.

May we together find something of joy and foolishness in our proceedings, in our attending to God our lover. May we lose ourselves in praise, wonder, awe. May we find Christ in our midst and in our souls, and there always listen to his voice before we serve Christ in the world. So be it. Amen.