



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Dannals, *Interim Rector*

## Choosing the Better Way

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 17, 2016  
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 10:38-42*

Scott was always conscientious, forever high-energy. From his early days he found success and accolades by his frenetic pace. When he was my roommate in college, we used to say that he could "sell snow cones to the Eskimos and white sand to the Bahamians."

Voted most likely to succeed by the high school class of 1971, Scott set out in adult life to be part of the answer rather than part of the problem. With good looks, a winsome personality, high intelligence, and a keen business acumen, he became a roaring success. If I assigned a hymn to Scott's life it would be "How Great Thou Art."

In the 1995 edition of the *Orlando Magazine*, Scott and his picturesque family appeared on the front cover. The title listed them as, "The Go Get 'Em Family."

There was only one problem: Scott didn't plan on getting sick!

In 2001, Scott received the devastating diagnosis that he had a rare, fast-growing blood cancer — akin to leukemia—and there was no known treatment or cure.

In the months following this news, Scott began a life's inventory and determined that he would live the rest of his days with a different perspective. He had been an infrequent churchgoer, he had been a modest giver of time and money, he had sparsely invested energy with his children, and he had spent enormous amounts of time amassing wealth.

What happened next comes close to the miraculous, because this previously self-serving, self-absorbed person was transformed. Even when he went into remission for some years, he stuck to the "new Scott." He found great strength in prayer and in quality time with his family and friends. He began asking questions, he showed great interest and compassion for the poor, and he began to speak out on a number of important social issues.

In August of 2009, Scott died.

At the funeral I sat next to the pastor of Scott's church, and I looked at hundreds of heartbroken faces. As the 23rd Psalm was read ... "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," I thought, "Well, we do want! We want Scott; we want him back." We wanted him back for what he was in his earlier days, and we especially wanted him back for what he had become. And if that wasn't enough, the tenor then sang a piercing rendition of "Amazing Grace."

The music gently found its way into all of our protected and successful hearts, telling each of us what the old spiritual announced: "In each and every day, there's a better way." Then, there was silence ... a long period of silence.

I've known that silence hundreds and hundreds of times over the past 36 years of ordained ministry. It's a silence that comes over those attending funerals. But it's not only on those occasions, but also by —

- + Lab reports announcing cancer;
- + Business executives trying to explain downsizing;

+ Notes on the hallway table saying, "I'm leaving";

The silence is produced by —

- + Gravestones in the middle of a field;
- + The smell of nursing homes late at night;
- + Children with high fevers;
- + Blank and boring stares at work;
- + Frenetic and successful people who find their lives empty.

Most of the time we're able to cover this silence with cherished distractions and anxious activity. But occasionally something breaks through and quiets us, enabling the questions:

+ Why am I here? What is really important? Is there anything to quench my thirst?

It is here that we discover God's presence. It was the same quiet moment of decision when Mary "chose the better way."

We learn in our gospel text that Martha was "distracted by her many tasks." The Greek word for "distracted" ("*perispao*") means "pulled or dragged away." In other words, perhaps Martha would like to have had a quiet place to reflect and meditate, but her long list of duties pulled her away from the refreshment of quiet time. Recognizing her anxiety and her inability to choose to have time away from her work, Jesus states that "only one thing" is needed: "Mary has chosen the better way."

Much of our anxiety in life is our fear of losing what we have. We fear losing our jobs. We fear losing our household members. We fear financial ruin; we fear being harmed, or getting sick, or dying. It is usually our fears that cause our distractions. The fact that things can be taken away from us is a reality with which we have to deal. That famous and familiar line from I Corinthians reminds us of this fact: "As for prophecies they will pass away, as for tongues they will cease, as for knowledge it will pass away..." And all we have will eventually be taken away, save three, the Apostle Paul utters: "Faith, Hope and Love, these three abide, and the greatest of these is love."

As Mary seeks these gifts, she becomes our model: "She has chosen the better way."

And, so, what are the features of the better way? Let me suggest four:

First, to set aside what might be called "sacred space." It might be as simple as a corner chair in your apartment, or a quiet place to sit here in the church or the chapel. It could be a kneeler. A place to light a candle or burn some incense. A room possibly where you can listen to sacred music... All of these spaces and places provide a setting for "quiet confidence" before God. And keep a date in this place on a regular basis: daily or weekly at the same time, and make sure that your sacred space is removed from computers and cell phones. And definitely don't link into Pokémon Go!

Second, as people of the Book, most of us need the sacred scriptures as a regular part of our quiet time. You may want the *Book of Common Prayer* near. Keep a notebook handy to jot notes as you read the scriptures. There are many lectionaries and commentaries you can choose to help with this discipline and discovery.

Third, keep it simple. When it comes to reflection, prayer, meditation and Bible reading, we are all beginners. Keep your prayers simple, like breathing, and as natural as eating, drinking, or sleeping.

And four, the better, reflective way is meant as preparation for service. We are not invited in Baptism to merely sit still. Oh yes, Mary's better way includes quiet and centering, but it is to get us ready to roll up our sleeves, open up our hearts and pocket books, and open our spirits to be of good use for God and God's world.

In the silence of August of 2009, Scott's family found a prayer tucked into his Bible, a prayer that he and I knew all the way back to undergraduate days, by William Borden—They had it read at the funeral:

"Lord Christ, I take my hands off as far as my life is concerned. Transform me, nourish me, and then use me ... Not for my small purposes, but for your larger mission. I offer to you in an answering love my gratitude and service. Make me generous, loving and of good use to others. I am yours."

Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are distracted and anxious about many things, Mary has chosen the better way."

**© 2016 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.**

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022