

As I have mentioned before, I was blessed with wonderful parents. I never doubted their love for me. But my Mother and Father differed in the way they showed that love. For instance, as regards to football. My two younger brothers and I all played football at Ringdall Junior High and at Newport High School in the late 1970s and early 80s. My Father was not an overly demonstrative man. He tended to show his love by his actions more than through his words. And one way he did this for us boys was by showing up at our games. I think I can speak for my brothers when I say that even in Junior High Dad never missed one of our football games. We played after school at 3:30 so it meant he had to leave work early and ride the bus back from Seattle, but there he always was on the sidelines dressed in jacket and tie – maybe carrying a briefcase. Dad wasn't a "yeller." He didn't cheer or make a lot of noise. He would just walk up and down the sidelines following the line of scrimmage. But this meant that we could discuss the game in detail at the dinner table later that evening – much to the boredom of others around the table, I suppose.

My Father enjoyed football – and all sports. My Mother's attitude was different. She would have preferred we didn't play football at all. It just seemed to her to be a silly way to get hurt. She didn't come to our games in Junior High. But once we entered High School she would accompany Dad on Friday nights, and sit in the stands with him. She didn't understand or enjoy football. She occupied herself the whole night looking for number 95. My brothers and I all played Defensive End and wore number 95. From 1977 until 1983 there was always a Nagel number 95 on the Newport team. And knowing that our number was 95 Mom focused on number 95 rather than the football. Mom was watching every play to see that 95 got up off the ground. If he did it was a good play in Mom's book. She threatened us that if 95 did not get up she would rush onto the field screaming, "My baby! My baby! What have you done to my baby?!" I knew she was only half joking.

"Lord, do you not care that my sister had left me by myself to do the serving?" This is one of those stories in the Bible that irritates a lot of people. Why shouldn't Martha ask for help? She seems to be carrying the whole load. Somebody has to take care of what needs to get done so life can go on. Mary seems to be freeloading. There will be time for sitting around listening to Jesus once the work gets done.

But we need to see that Jesus doesn't see Martha and Mary as either/or. They are both part of each one of us. We do have to do the work of this world and our vocation. But first of all we must sit at the feet of Jesus. "There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

To encounter Jesus Christ is the purpose of our lives. There is nothing more important. Again, there is nothing more important. That's why I constantly urge you to give at least 20 minutes a day to meditative prayer. It is a matter of love. I think of my Father, and my brothers and I, and the football games at Ringdall. I didn't appreciate it at the time, but it must have taken a lot of work to arrange his schedule so he could make time for those games. He enjoyed football, but he loved us – and sometimes when it rained or was cold it couldn't have been enjoyment that brought him to the game. It could only have been love. Even though there was not a lot of talk, just Dad's presence assured us of his love for us. He showed up.

I think about Dad's presence and the way we make time for prayer – or not. It takes a lot of work to re-arrange our schedules for those 20 minutes. It's not always enjoyable. But just show up and God knows it. And we know God knows it, and that is enough for love.

But here's another way to pray – to show God our love, not to replace those 20 minutes, but to complement them. Throughout the day we can “practice the presence of God.” What do I mean? Just as I said encountering Jesus is the purpose and entire point of our lives, so encountering Him in the moment to moment of our day is the most important thing we will do all day!

How are we to judge if our day has been “good” or not? We tend to think it's been a good day if we accomplish the tasks set for us – or have experienced certain kinds of pleasure. But, in fact, for a Christian, a day is good in so far as we've kept our eye on Jesus throughout it.

My Mother never took her eye off of number 95. In all the noise, violence and confusion of all those football plays she just kept her eye on 95. That's exactly the attitude of practicing the presence of God: keeping our eyes – or rather our hearts – on the one we love, God, throughout the noise and confusion of our day. It's simple, but not easy. Just constantly call to mind that Jesus is right here – present, right now, always. That's called being “recollected.” It's amazing how we change our actions, words, thoughts when we remember Jesus is right here. Oh, how we grow in our love of Him! It takes practice and many failures. We'll forget Him often. But when we do, we just remember Jesus again after having forgotten Him – perhaps all day – and pick up where we left off, without fuss or guilt.

One trick to help us practice the presence of God is to pray the Jesus Prayer. Maybe during part of your 20 minutes you continuously, softly pray a prayer under your breath. The Eastern Church uses this prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ be merciful to me (a sinner).” But you could also use your own prayer. For example, ‘Jesus I love you.’ “Jesus, I'm at your service.” “Jesus you are here.” It should just be short – and should use the name of Jesus. And pray it always, not just in meditation, but throughout the day in the world, while you are riding the bus, while you are doing the dishes like Martha, while you are waiting in line or walking down the street. Pray the name of Jesus.

I didn't know it at the time, but my parents, each in their own way, taught me how to pray by teaching me ways to love: to be present, and to keep my eye on the one I love one matter what. That's what Jesus wanted from Mary -- and Martha. It's what He wants from us. Before we can really work for Him, we must make time in our lives to be present for Him – and keep our hearts focused on him throughout the day. There is nothing more important in life than this sitting at the feet of Jesus. We must not let it be taken from us.