

Life Lived With God

I. Contemplative vs. Activist

- A. Today's Gospel story, short and to the point raises a profound meditation for everyone of us and I hope to share some of that with you in this sermon.
 - 1. It's about the age old struggle between word and deed,\ the speaker and the doer,\ the contemplative and the activist.
 - a. It is a dilemma that will no doubt be with us till the end of time.
 - b. The complaint of one about the other will be raised in the future as frequently as it has in the past.--
 - 2. Who does not sympathize with Martha, reduced to the drudgery of service --
 - a. while her sister enjoys the excitement of one to one conversation with Jesus.
 - 3. And Mary could complain legitimately of Martha too –
 - a. as Jesus does on this occasion – for immersing herself in activity with little thought for the larger picture behind all her care-filled work.

II. Worried, Distracted Martha

- A. When Jesus decided to drop in on Martha and her sister Mary, Martha's first impulse was to get something going in the kitchen.
 - 1. In doing this she was being faithful to the tradition of hospitality begun long ago when Abraham welcomed three guests to his tent (Gen. 18:1-10).
 - a. If you remember that story, Abraham turned to his wife Sarah to assist with the duties./
 - b. Martha expected Mary to do the same.
 - c. Martha's expectation did not include Mary's dropping everything to just sit out in the living room and leave all the work to her.
 - (1. But that is just exactly what her sister did.
 - (2. Mary was in no hurry to come into the kitchen.
 - 2. While Martha was flipping through the cookbooks,\ boiling the water,\ chopping the vegetables,\ and setting the table for three,---
 - a. Mary settled down at the feet of her friend and guest,

- (1. attentive to what he was saying .
 - b. In fact, by sitting at Jesus' feet, Mary had taken the posture of a disciple.
 - c. Who could blame Martha for banging a few pots and putting the plates down on the table with a sturdy thump? –
- B. Perhaps Jesus heard the bustling around back there and, after awhile, even the muttering. --
 - 1. Martha was not one to keep her feelings under a tight lid.
 - 2. Jesus was pretty sharp at gauging what was going on in people.
 - a. He recognized the muttering quickly, long before Martha's frustration exploded into words,--
 - (1. but he waited until Martha spoke.---
 - 3. "*Lord,*" Martha began, "*don't you care...*"
 - a. – you can see Mary was not the only one under scrutiny---
 - b. "*don't you care*" she repeated,
 - (1. and then the gaze fell on her sister, Mary, ----
 - (2. "*that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving.?*"
 - 4. Maybe Jesus even smiled when he said,
 - a. "*Martha, dear friend, you are worried and distracted by many things.*"
 - b. Looking closely here you can see,
 - (1. he is not going after Busy Martha,\\ but Worried and Distracted Martha. ---
 - c. He is speaking to his dear friend Martha, who has worked herself into a state of anxious distraction over the meal she wanted to have for him.
 - d. She has focused her frustration not only on her sister but now also on her friend and guest, ---
 - e. Jesus is gently calling her to re-focus. ---
 - (1. Hospitality is not primarily about food;
 - (2. more important is the focus, attending to one's guest.
 - (3. But Martha's comments are centered on 'me' talk (3 times).//
- C. When anxiety in well doing becomes the measure of our hospitality,-- then the Church has forgotten the One whom we have gathered to serve.
 - 1. How often we lapse out of focus.
 - a. We make Christ instrumental, a means to an end, to something bigger in our sights, our church programs. ---

- b. And without realizing it we cease to attend to the Word that first called us into being, the profound reality of Christ.
- 2. A church that has become “*worried and distracted by many things*”---
 - a. inevitably will be a community that dwells in the shadow of
 - (1. frantic potlucks,\ anxious stewardship campaigns,\
 - (2. and events designed simply to maintain the institution.
 - b. Decisions will inevitably be made without a hint of God’s reign or a recognition of ourselves as Christ’s disciples.
 - c. We’ll put food and drink on the table without seeing Christ in the breaking of bread.
 - d. We may address social issues, but the gospel is missed in acts that are simply politics as usual.

III. Our Continuous, Partial Attention

- A. There are plenty of commentaries written on the disease of the Internet age, --- one diagnosis is: “*continuous partial attention.*”
 - 1. Perhaps it is not only the disease of the Internet age;
 - a. perhaps it has always been with us, and just the causes of our inattention have altered.
 - b. But truly, it is ever more obvious that we are a people driven by distractions.
 - c. The sin of our time is not the lack of doing things, but rather aimless doing,\ missing the connection to God who is good,---
 - (1. the ground and energy of effective action.
 - 2. Jesus said to Martha, “*Mary has chosen the good part.*”
- B. A few years ago I found a short prayer written by the noted philosopher/theologian of the 19th century, Soren Kierkegaard, entitled: “*To Will One Thing.*” (written in 19th C. terminology)
 - 1. “*Father in Heaven! What is man without Thee! What is all that he knows, vast accumulation though it be,-- but a chipped fragment if he does not know Thee! \ What is all his striving, could it even encompass a world,-- but a half-finished work if he does not know Thee: Thee the One, Who art one thing and Who art all! -- So may Thou give to the intellect wisdom to comprehend that one thing;\ to the heart, sincerity to receive this understanding;\ to the will, purity that wills only one thing.*” (To Will One Thing, ed. by William Scarlett, Forward Movement Pub., 1994)
 - 2. I think the prayer illustrates the point of the story of Martha and Mary.

- a. This story has a history of simplistic interpretations that assert the superiority of the contemplative life over active service,\ to polarize the activities of Martha and Mary.
 - b. But that certainly does not hold up when you consider the volume of teachings in all the gospels about the integral aspect of service to Christian discipleship.
 - c. The issue is “*distraction*,” -- our inability to come into a relationship with God because we never get around to it.
 - (1. Or, as Kierkegaard says in his prayer, “*our inability to will the one thing that is needed.*”
 - d. The path to fulfillment in our lives, what we are created to be, is living centered on God.
 - e. It is then that we can discern God’s word to us that must be the basis of action, in order for our action to be ‘right action.’
3. So often we have spent most of our lives pursuing our own agenda and when that is finished and gone ---
- (1. we haven’t a clue what our lives are about,
 - (2. about being in relation with the One who gave us our lives to begin with.

C. Like most of us I have to admit that my own life has been consumed with activity, being driven to use my time as effectively as I possibly can.

- 1. After more than 33 years of very hectic work in the church, when I retired I was offered a five week residency at Bishop’s Ranch outside of Healdsburg, a retreat and conference center.
 - a. My responsibilities were to lead morning and evening prayer every day, except Sundays.
 - (1. The rest of my time was relatively free.
 - b. So each morning at 7 am I’d walk over to St. George’s Chapel for 60 minutes of set up, quiet and liturgical prayers.
 - (1. And the same at 5:00 pm.
 - (2. About half the time I’d be by myself to enjoy the quiet and beautiful space.
 - c. I’ll never forget an experience I had on the very last day of my 5 weeks there.
 - (1. At the end of my morning prayers I had very strong sense of God speaking within me saying, “*I really enjoy your company.*”
 - (2. It was a little bit startling, because I always look at it the other way around, I’m seeking God’s company.

- (3. I had an immediate and unusual sense of God's love and then,\ the realization that the way I and we live most of our lives is taken up with distractions from the divine at the core of our being.
2. Certainly we can't replicate the kind of retreat I experienced those five weeks in the midst of our work lives.
 - a. But we need a reminder of something from our Hebrew/Christian spiritual tradition that we've lost.
 - (1. That is the practice of the Sabbath, offering one day to lay aside our agendas and be present with God.
 - (2. We need to schedule this into our lives.
 - (3. A powerful way to do this if we can is to be outdoors and discover how the natural world can speak deeply to us of living with God.
 - (4. And the Sabbath has always carried with it the practice of worship, both with our communities and in our solitary places. It's a discipline not to forsake.
 - b. But another practice that is imperative is taking time every day to stop our hectic activity and rest quietly in God's presence.
 - (1. Even that will be difficult for some.
 - (2. But we must find a way to integrate a practice of relinquishing our feverish minds and agendas.
 - (3. It comes down to letting go of our focus on striving after success, efficiency and productivity.
 - c. The fruit of this kind of living is discovering God present in our activity in a way that is creative.
 - (1. Once you get a taste of it you won't want to let it go.
 - (2. It's like the seed that has to germinate in the dark soil before it can become a sprout and grow into a plant.
- D. Do we know ourselves to be people who are living with God, fundamentally and really,\ always and everywhere,\ so that in fact we are never alone?
 1. Could I make my home with God, even here?
 - a. in a nursing home,\ in a hospital,\ or even in a jail?
 - b. when I am old and left behind?
 - c. or,--- would I feel abandoned?
 2. How could we like Mary, sit at the feet of Jesus?
 - a. The psalmist says, "*My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast.*" (63:8).
 - (1. It is a ringing affirmation of and the direction toward the renewal of our lives,--
 - (2. which is the life of God already at work within me.