Sermon for The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, July 21, 2019

Title: A better way

At some point during middle school, I developed the unfortunate habit - as teenage girls, at least then, were wont to do - of overusing the word “like.” I would, like, say “like,” like, all the time. It was, like, kind of, like, a problem. Generally speaking, my teachers and parents and peers tolerated this quirk, but it drove my older sister – a very mature High School Freshmen - absolutely bonkers. We could barely begin a conversation before she’d interrupt me to offer some deeply loving expression of concern like, “what’s wrong with you?” or “why are you talking so funny?” To which I had, invariably, no good response. Why was I talking so funny? Did some inner insecurity manifest in this newfound stutter? Possibly. Did I look to my friends and simply mimic their mode of, like, speaking? Probably. Did I pick it up from TV shows and movies that celebrated the ditzy, ridiculous heroine? Perhaps. To be entirely honest, I didn’t know. Looking back now, I wonder if I wasn’t at some critical juncture in linguistic development when I was capable of much more nuanced, complex thought than my tongue was yet ready to transmit, and all those “likes” gave me a little time to figure out what I was actually trying to say. But, in all fairness, this, like all the other possibilities, is nothing more than a hypothesis. I had no good answer for my sister. I have no good answer to her questions. I simply trusted that she would wait this storm out, and, thankfully, she did.

And many years later, when she developed the unfortunately habit – as Stanford undergraduates, at least then, were wont to do – of being perpetually overwhelmed and over-scheduled, always tired and worried and late, distracted by her many tasks, and I found myself saying, with less judgement – for I did not have the excuse of being a High School Freshmen – things like, “what’s going on with you?” and she would say, never one to kid herself, “I have no idea,” I believed her. I understood.

Today, Jesus stumbles into the relationship of two sisters. The home of two sisters. And it is hard to know who would have driven whom more bonkers. Martha, with her perpetual motion. Always working. Always busy. Mouths to feed. Dishes to wash. Floors to sweep. Or Mary. So … so … I’m tempted to say “spacey” but that belies a prejudicial interpretation of this tale. After
all, Mary never even speaks. Perhaps she was not so much absorbed in daydreams as simply alarmingly, disarmingly, present. And along comes this wandering wise man, requiring of them, as usual, the requisite hospitality dictated by culture and custom. Tea. A warm, safe place to sleep. A meal. For three long days. So Martha, the older sister, never one to kid herself, gets to work. But Mary - she’s caught up in her own world. Captivated by the moment. And this teacher – well! He certainly doesn’t seem like any of the others. If only Martha would stop fussing – “a spot of tea? a little more wine? the figs are beyond compare this time of year!” – she could finally focus.

Mary, shooting Martha the stink eye, finally snaps her sister’s last, exhausted nerve, who cries, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” Thinking she has surely gained the high ground, Martha smiles smugly and Mary swallows hard as they both wait for this strange teacher to chide the child in the room. But, much to both their surprise, he turns to Martha with a look of deep understanding, eyes full of compassion, saying, “Martha, Martha” – my dear, my friend, my love – “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."

Oh, how many ways into this text there are! Perhaps I should take the archetypal. This view sees Martha and Mary as two types of people, two ways of patterning a life. Martha represents the active life – a life lived in the world, a life full of tasks and work and marriage and children and balancing checkbooks and all the legitimate distractions of adult-ing, while Mary represents the path of the contemplative – the monk or nun, perhaps the priest, who has chosen the quiet way of self-denial and self-deprecation, a life open to and embracing of the ultimate distraction of noticing God’s movements in the world. Mary has, apparently, chosen the better part – a life of quiet, humble simplicity, of prayer and service, this being obviously superior to the worldly life of action.

Only … well … lives just never seem to fall into such clearly delineated categories. In The Active Life, a delightful and courageous book, Quaker author and educator Parker Palmer takes on this illusory dichotomy with force, arguing that many – perhaps most – people of good and deep faith are called to active lives: lives lived in the muck and mire and joy and jealousy and agony and ecstasy of this world, including, to be clear, most Protestant clergy and religious
folk, present company included. Surely God values, celebrates, delights in, the way of the doer? The active life? If not, why would God have called so many people into it?

The archetypal being a far too simplistic lens, perhaps I’ll take the feminist route. This is, after all, a rare scriptural story featuring two women. A tale in which Jesus apparently chooses the company of two females. One is serving, the Greek word “diakonia” the same that will go on to inform the ordained role of the Deacon (which, side note, was an office even the Bible attests to being held by women in the early Church), while the other, Mary, is sitting quietly at Jesus’ feet. It’s too easy to see Mary as the passive, obedient, acquiescent one, some sort of ideal for ancient women who had, frankly, no substantive role in public life.

The truth its more shocking, as the story highlights not simply that Mary was so receptive but that Jesus was so willing to teach her, so happy to have a another female disciple, another woman friend and student. Scholars see this story as a quite explicit celebration of the theological education of women. And if we read the early history of the Church as God’s ongoing revelation, it might even be something of a critique for that nascent ecclesia, a body that would, eventually, deny many diligent Martha’s their rightful place at the altar and in the community serving as “diakonia.” Perhaps Luke, the Gospel author most concerned with the place and priorities of women, wished to remind readers of every gender that women could and would continue to be students of the good news, faithful listeners, diligent learners, and this good grace would – thanks be to God, for them, their families, and the Church on earth and in heaven - never be taken away from them. This will not surprise you, but I’m fond of this lens.

That said, I’m going to take another perspective entirely this morning. Instead of seeing Mary and Martha as representing two distinct potential patterns or paths, or two characters in an important allegory on the life and character of the early Church, I wonder if they might not also represent two aspects of the individual self. Two natural, life-giving tendencies in each of us which, together, contribute to our flourishing.

Let’s say Martha does represent the impulse toward action, creativity, productivity. Even the most zealous, industrious, fruitful life of faith necessarily includes moments of quiet and prayer, times for solitude and silence, rest and retreat, Sabbath and serenity. Think of someone who spends their life working for justice, organizing, writing, reading, teaching, marching, but always starts and ends the day with 20 minutes of silence and The Lord’s Prayer. And let’s say Mary does represent the impulse toward contemplation, reflection, meditation. Even the most
diligent and disciplined life includes times of hard labor and physical exertion, times of invigorating activity and creative collaboration. The rules of life of even the strictest monastic communities commend, in some measure, manual labor, cooking, gardening, cleaning, hospitality, administration, spiritual direction, writing, and more, all active undertakings nevertheless integral to the integrity of a contemplative life. Jesus does not tell Martha that she is occupied in bad, wasteful, or indulgent things. It might well be that he sympathizes with her. Jesus himself seems often frustrated by his many tasks, worried about all he has yet to do. It may even be that Martha’s way is good. It’s just that Mary’s way is better. Why does this matter?

Throughout the 1960s, a curious bit of pop psychology emerged. As early studies of the two hemispheres of the brain became widely known, showing the left side to be logical and verbal, type-A and driven, and the right more emotional and creative, there was a sense that this distinction explained particular styles of personality. And so we developed a tendency to describe people as left-brained – like engineers – or right-brained – like artists - depending on their particular gifts and inclinations. Recently, psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist has further studied the divided brain, asking why we need two halves? What purpose is there in their redundancies, and their particularities? Instead of asking what they do, he focused his research instead on what they are like and on how they do what they do. His most recent book, The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World explores these questions.

Critically, he notes that while the two hemispheres of the brain do indeed do things differently and even have radically different priorities, being fully human requires not only the input of each side but the balanced input of each side. This balance, though, is lopsided. The right side focuses on the big picture. The left on the details. The right side is concerned with a coherent narrative, the through line, the connections, the big picture, not unlike Mary. The left wants to reduce experience to patterns, algorithms, details, tasks, not unlike Martha.

McGilchrist argues that “both are essential. If you can't see the big picture, you don't understand what you're doing. If you can't home in on the details, you can't accomplish the simplest tasks.”¹ The trouble is, western culture has become obsessed with the analytical functions of the left hemisphere. The title of McGilchrist’s book comes from a parable about a wise spiritual master who rules over a land. The master appoints an emissary - a smart, capable

messenger, whose job is to carry the master's instructions all across the land. He is driven and intelligent, but not wise enough to know what he does not know. So at some point the emissary, proud and indignant, thinks, *why am I the shmuck doing all the work, while my master just sits around thinking all day long?* So he puts on the master’s cloak and pretends to be the one in charge. Only because he doesn’t know what he doesn’t know, and isn’t listening to everyone else, he brings ruin upon the community, and upon himself, and the kingdom falls apart.

McGilchrist sees this as a cautionary tale in our left-hemisphere culture, because the truth is the brain only works properly when the right side – that reflective, contemplative side – dons the cloak and holds it all together. We need the through line, the story, the big picture first and foremost, and yes, it is wonderful to understand that big picture in greater detail and with more clarity awareness through analytical thinking, but the critical mind on its own has no priorities, no values, no morals, no sense of right and wrong. It is helpful. It has important functions. But the right side must lead.

Perhaps this is not unlike what Jesus meant when he told Martha that her sister had chosen the better part. The active impulse is good, sacred, holy, life-giving, but it is through contemplation that we are grounded in the most sacred story of all, that our lives are woven into a big picture that is more expansive than our own small mindedness, and that we are reconnected with the ultimate through line: God. The patterns of our action ought be informed by our contemplation and prayer, not the other way around. Can you imagine how unbalanced life would be if our prayer and contemplation were chiefly defined by our worldly needs and constraints, our fears and insecurities, our driven diligence? Sadly, most of us probably can, because this usually how we approach our contemplative sides: as emissaries of a busy, distracted, worried master, something we do with our leftover time. An indulgence. A distraction. How different might our lives be if we followed Mary’s example and trusted Jesus’ words. How much fuller, connected, more engaged and more alive might we find ourselves. “Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." **Amen.**