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With Singleness of Heart

“Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” Oh, this old familiar story! Jesus is visiting his friends, the sisters Mary and Martha of Bethany – Mary and Martha whom we have encountered in the other gospels, and most prominently in the story of the raising of Lazarus in John’s gospel. Here in Luke’s gospel, after Jesus has settled himself in their house, Mary has plunked herself at Jesus’ feet. Never mind that in her culture women didn’t mix with men who were not their relatives. Nor did they study Torah or listen to the teaching of learned rabbis. Meanwhile, Martha has assumed all the duties of being a good hostess. Perhaps she’s had to slaughter, dress, and cook the meat, make the cakes, prepare the fruits and vegetables, set the table, even heat the water for the bath that Jesus would surely want. No wonder she’s cranky! But when she complains to Jesus and tries to pull her sister away from him, Jesus applauds what Mary has done. What’s going on here?

We’re now in the middle of Jesus’ long journey to Jerusalem in Luke. In chapter 9, Jesus, having announced his coming death, “set his face toward Jerusalem,” where his death would take place. Now, in this travelogue, the evangelist, through what he relates of Jesus’ teaching, is reflecting on the nature of discipleship, on what it means to follow Jesus to the cross. Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus’ charge to the seventy, as he sent them out to proclaim the nearness of God’s reign. Last week we heard the parable of the Good Samaritan. In response to the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor,” Jesus reminded his followers – and by extension us – that we are called to minister to all – to all regardless of who they are.

So now what is going on here? Here’s what the story of Mary and Martha is not about. It’s not about a conflict between the contemplative and active life, as if Jesus were telling the sisters that immersion in prayer is preferable to doing one’s daily work. It’s not about a contrast between thinkers and doers. Nor is it a criticism of women’s traditional domestic role and a validation of women’s role in religious leadership, important as that may be.

This is a story about a teachable moment. The gospels clearly show us that in his own ministry Jesus was always fully present to the person right in front of him. Think about it. “For Jesus the one thing needed is to connect with the person in front of him

... whether the person is a lawyer trying to learn what the word 'neighbor' means or a tax collector so short he has to climb up a tree to see a traveling teacher.... He loves each of these people and does not move on past them until they have what they need to love him back."¹ In coming into the home of Mary and Martha, Jesus has shown this same care for the sisters, focusing on their needs and being fully present to them. Mary understands this. She in turn gives Jesus all her attention, connecting with him and relishing his presence. In contrast, Martha is anxious. The text intentionally uses the word "distracted." Martha is unfocused. Martha is multi-tasking, almost unaware of who is in her midst. Is it any wonder that Jesus affirms Mary's choice?

But be careful: Jesus' affirmation of Mary's behavior is not a rebuke of Martha. Jesus loved Martha just as much as he loved Mary. I once tried to imagine this story from the perspectives of all three characters. I saw Jesus embracing Martha and reassuring her that, although her work was important, at that moment connecting with him and being fully present to him were more important. I would guess too that Mary, having experienced Jesus' loving presence, was then able to share that love with others, including her sister.

So how are we to exercise ministry and follow Jesus as his disciples? Here we learn that true discipleship means being fully present to Christ, deepening our experience of Christ, experiencing Christ's love for us, and sharing that love by connecting with and being fully present to those who are right in front of us, regardless of who they are.

So first we are called to be fully present to Christ. Of course, we are called to be fully present in worship. It's not surprising that, as Anglicans, we believe in what we call the Real Presence, i.e., that Christ is truly present to us in the bread and wine, that the Eucharist is more than a memorial. Christ is truly here with us. Are we truly here with him? Are we alive to his presence? Some of you know that in the past I wasn't a big fan of Sanctus bells, i.e., the bells that are rung when the priest says, "This is my Body, this is my Blood." However, I've come to realize that they graciously remind us of Christ's presence with us in the consecrated bread and wine. As you hear them, let them sharpen your awareness of his presence and help you to focus on him.

We can also be fully present to Christ in contemplative prayer. There are so many ways to draw nearer to Christ, to sit like Mary in quiet relationship with him. Centering prayer is one way, as is journaling, reflectively reading Scripture, listening to

¹ Mary Sloan Hinkle, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 305-306.

music, reading poetry, walking in the woods – any practice where we can be silent long enough for Christ to get a word in edgewise. Have you ever considered a silent retreat? I guarantee you that they are not only for clergy!

We're also called to be fully present to ourselves. We can remember who we are and whose we are. We can remember that, like Mary, we too are God's beloved children, that we too can be present to God who is always and already present to us. Aren't we often more like Martha, on autopilot, anxiously going through our days, running to and fro, multitasking, distracted, and worried, not present to God, and unaware of ourselves? Is there time in your day for self-reflection, for introspection?

Finally, we are called to follow Jesus by being fully present to the needs of the world around us. Indeed, our relationship with Christ drives us to serve others. When we are fully present to Christ in worship and sacrament, when we are connected to God through prayer, when we know ourselves to be God's beloved children, then we must go out into the world. We must see Christ's presence in all whom we meet, connect to them, and serve them as he would.

Most of us live out our *diakonia*, the ministry to the world to which a life of prayer impels us, in our daily lives. We minister prayerfully when we are fully present to those closest to us, in our families and workplaces. Brie Stoner is a student at the Center for Action and Contemplation founded by Franciscan Richard Rohr. She is also a young mother of a toddler and a nine-month-old baby. She relates a revelation she had in a conversation with James Finley, one of the faculty members at the center. As she was talking about how often her children interrupted the time for silent prayer that she felt her studies demanded, suddenly the light dawned on her. She realized that God was present to her *in the interruptions*. She says, "Yes, the interruption is the presence of God that I was so desperately trying to access in moments of stillness and silence. With or without the luxury of stillness and silence, God comes to us disguised as our very lives.... In my case, Jim helped me to discover how my path as an exhausted young parent was the monastery of my own transformation. If I learned to let my heart open enough, I just might begin to recognize each cry, each diaper change, every choo-choo play time request . . . all of it, as the startlingly stunning, diaphanous infusion of infinite love colliding into the small shape of my very finite and ordinary reality. There, at the intersection of everything, is God with us . . . wanting to be touched, noticed, nurtured . . . held by us. All we have to do is behold."²

² "God Interrupting," in Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, June 27, 2019.

Are we also called to share our experiences of God's love with the wider world? Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister warns us that when we are fully present to Christ, when we are connected to God, then we have no choice but to be present to the needs of the world. She reminds us that, "Indeed, contemplation is a very dangerous activity. It not only brings us face to face with God, it brings us, as well, face to face with the world.... Then, the zeal for justice consumes us. Then, action and prayer are one."³

A couple of weeks ago, a Methodist pastor also preached about Jesus' sending of the Seventy. He prayed a long time about his sermon. He consulted with his spouse, always a trusted advisor, who encouraged him to listen to the Spirit. Screwing up his courage, he went ahead with what he felt would be a very risky paragraph. He asked his congregation to imagine themselves as the ones travelling without money, bag, or shoes. Could they imagine themselves as refugees, who often come to this country with just the clothes on their backs? A week or so later, he met with the lay people with whom he had a weekly contemplative prayer group. After their prayer time, one of the group members said, "Pastor, I've been haunted by your sermon. I know we have to do something for these refugees." Then another one spoke up, "I have spare rooms in my house. I know others who do too. Can we help shelter these refugees?" Prayer and loving action had surely come together for these folks.

At the Kirkbridge Retreat and Conference Center in Bangor, Pennsylvania, there is a bench inscribed with the words "picket and pray." Despite our different gifts, all of us are called to deepen both aspects of the Christian journey – contemplative prayer and acts of love. So seek God, experience God's love for you, and then go out to do the work God has given you, with "gladness and singleness of heart."

³ "The Path to Justice," in Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, July 3, 2019.