

ACTIVE? CONTEMPLATIVE? OR BOTH?

(09/17/17)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 10:25-42

“But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, 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.’” (Luke 10:41-42)

It’s wonderful to gather together this morning at the beginning of another church year! September is a time of new beginnings, a time of change and transition. The weather is beginning to change from the warmth of summer to the cool nights and crisp mornings of fall. In my early morning walks with Brie, our collie, I notice the diminished sound of birdsong and birdcalls as our little feathered friends begin their annual journey to warmer climes.

This year is a little different for me. It is the first time in many, many years that I have not gone back to school—either as a student or a teacher. After much thought, I have decided to take an “early retirement” from my teaching position at Assumption College.

I have mixed feelings about this decision. I have taught at Assumption College for twenty-four years. I will miss the students and the opportunity to expose them to humanistic psychology, existential psychology, psychology of religion, and Jungian psychology. I confess I will not miss having to get up so early in the morning twice a week and grading so many papers on so many weekends.

Some skeptics, both in my home and here at the church, knowing how much I abhor a vacuum, have wondered aloud what I will do with my “free time.” The implication that I will pick something else up, perhaps at the C. G. Jung Institute to fill the “empty hours,” really hurts!

It is the beginning of another new church year. Our boards and committees have already begun to meet. Our Sunday morning Bible study of Mark’s gospel resumed this morning, and the Spiritual Exploration Reading Group will begin to explore the 14th century Christian mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing* Tuesday, September 26. The choir is back in the choir loft and is already in fine voice, making their special contribution to our worship.

New beginnings always seem to arise out of endings. The sun sets a little earlier and is a little lower on the horizon every day. The leaves are starting to change color. In addition to the excitement of new beginnings in the fall, I always feel a sadness creep over me, a sadness tied to the end of summer and hints of the impending darkness and cold of the months ahead.

This summer has difficult for some of us. We continue to hold several members of our church family in our prayers as they struggle with illness or with problems that weigh them down and which promise no easy or quick solution. We also hold in our prayers those whose lives have been devastated by the hurricanes that have swept over so much of the southern United States and those who have suffered through the recent earthquake in Mexico.

So we come together again this morning as the gathered church. As we gather for worship and fellowship we witness to the importance of the community that sustains us when we are going through difficult times. We are especially aware of the importance of community at the beginnings, the endings, and the transition periods of our lives, for true Christian community is a container within which we live and through which we find meaning for our lives.

In the passage from Luke that precedes this morning's lesson, we learn that Jesus is traveling through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. In the course of his journey a Samaritan village refuses to receive him, refuses to offer him hospitality because he is Jewish and is headed toward Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. When Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he does so not only in response to a specific question from a lawyer but also to challenge his disciples to grow past the narrow tribal identifications that found expression in his rejection.

As we heard, a lawyer approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him what the scriptures teach. The lawyer responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus says, "Do this, and you will live."

The lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to experience *eternal life*. Note that in his response to the question, Jesus tells the man what he must do to *live*. This suggests that eternal life has to do with the way we live. It may also have to do with what happens after we die, but it is clear from Jesus' response that eternal life is something we can experience here and now.

In response to the lawyer's second question, Jesus tells him what it means to be a good neighbor. He calls the man to experience a relationship, a deep connection with all people. He calls the man to serve, to reach out to those in need, no matter who they are. As Christians we need to witness to this teaching when confronted either internally or externally by delusions of racial superiority and the concomitant prejudice that separates us from our brothers and sisters.

Jesus often employs what C. G. Jung called the *complexio oppositorum*, the complex of opposites that characterize the mystical teachings of all religions. Which is more important:

justice or forgiveness? Jesus says “both.” Which is more important: this life or the next? Jesus says “both.” Which is more important: faith or works? Jesus says “both.”

I love the way Jesus teaches! With few exceptions, Jesus does not preach sermons. His teaching arises in the context of normal everyday conversations. It arises in response to questions, even complaints. Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive his brother. The Pharisees ask Jesus whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. The lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Martha complains to Jesus about her sister. From Jesus’ response comes a teaching about the two poles of our Christian journey--growing and serving.

Martha asks Jesus to adjudicate a conflict between her and her sister, or at least to validate Martha’s frustrations concerning her sister. Note that Jesus does not do so. He does not tell Martha that one of them is right and one of them is wrong. Remember, Jesus has just told a parable about how important it is to serve.

Because Jesus has just been turned away from the Samaritan village, Martha’s offer of hospitality must have been exceptionally meaningful. Note that Martha welcomes Jesus “into her home.” I’m not sure how common it was in Jesus’ time for a woman to own a home and to serve as a host for an itinerant preacher. It may suggest that we cannot simply view Martha as a traditional woman and Mary as a counter-cultural feminist. They were both unusual women.

Martha is a worker; she serves. Mary is a student; she grows. Martha is an example of the active dimension of spirituality; Mary is an example of the contemplative. Which of these is more important to our spiritual journey? Which of these is the more important part of our relationship with our church? Which is more important in our search for eternal life? I think Jesus would say “both.”

Remember, both Martha and Mary are part of us. There is a Martha part of us and there is a Mary part of us. In the Christian tradition, we could refer to the Martha part as an example of active spirituality, and the Mary part as an example of contemplative spirituality. The question we should ask in relation to the *complexio oppositorum* is whether we are honoring both poles in our spiritual journey. We need to examine whether we are neglecting one of these two parts. Like the lawyer, we should seek to find that which we need to become whole.

This morning’s Litany at the Beginning of a New Church Year encourages us to experience, develop, and express both the Martha and the Mary dimensions of our spirituality.

We can grow in faith through worship, through study, through being faithful in prayer. I find it difficult to believe that we could read scripture, listen to an anthem, sing the hymns, write or listen to a sermon, and engage in prayer without learning something new, without deepening our relationship with God. No matter how many times we attend our Christmas Eve and Maundy Thursday services, every time we attend, as we open ourselves to the feelings they evoke and the lessons they impart, we deepen our connection with our Lord and with the deepest parts of ourselves.

We can grow in service as we seek new ways to share our gifts. Each of us has something that we can share with this church and with the world. The good deeds, the good works that are so characteristic of our church do not arise out of a vacuum. They are the expressions of a deep and meaningful Christian faith.

In our litany this morning, we affirmed both the Martha and the Mary parts of ourselves, both the active and the contemplative. Jesus not only fed the hungry and healed the sick, he also went aside to pray, to deepen his relationship with God. The most active Marthas in our congregation, and there are many, are as good as they are at being Marthas because they have been and continue to be Marys. They are always seeking to learn and grow. They have a lot to share, but only because of what they have received.

My prayer is that at the beginning of a new church year we will resolve to nurture both the Mary and the Martha sides of us in the year to come. If we do, like the lawyer, we will experience eternal life, and we will become the church that God wants us to be.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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