

THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY--A *COMPLEXIO OPPOSITORUM*

(09/10/2023)

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 on Rally Day 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 hot, humid days of summer to the cool nights and crisp mornings of fall, with the exception of this past week, which was brutal—unseasonably hot and humid for September. In my early morning walks with our collie, Brie, I already notice the diminished sound of birdsong and birdcalls as our little feathered friends begin their annual journey to warmer climes.

Even though most of us in this church do not “go away” for the summer or spend most weekends on our yachts, and even though our Sunday morning attendance holds relatively stable throughout the summer, for many years we have celebrated Rally Day as the beginning of another new church year. Our boards and committees have already begun to meet. Our Sunday morning Bible study met this morning, and the Spiritual Study & Growth Group will meet this coming Tuesday. The choir, as you have noticed, is back in the choir loft and is already in fine voice, making their special contribution to our worship!

New beginnings always seem tied to endings; they seem to arise out of endings. This is because every exit is an entry into something else—and this includes what we experience as the “exit” of death. We note that the sun sets a little earlier and is a little lower on the horizon every day. Here and there, a few leaves have started to change color. In addition to the excitement of new beginnings in the fall, and the many, many years when it meant a return to school, I experience a feeling of melancholy creep over me, a sadness tied to the end of summer and hints of the impending darkness and cold of the months ahead.

This past three and a half years have been difficult for all of us, extremely 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 the people of Ukraine whose lives have been torn apart by the Russian invasion. We hold in our prayers the 90,000 people in our country who have been the victim of gun violence so far this year. And we pray that the the determined attack on women’s reproductive rights and LGBTQ rights, with special vitriol directed toward our trans children, our trans brothers and sisters, will cease, will be replaced by sensitivity, empathy, and love.

And so, in this midst of difficult times individually, nationally, and globally, 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 offer him hospitality because he is a Jew 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. And he challenges us to do this today—to grow past the narrow tribal identifications that lead us to turn our back on our brothers and sisters, on Jesus and his teachings.

As we heard this morning, a lawyer approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life, to experience the realm of the eternal. Jesus, who often answers a question with a question, 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."

Note that the lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to experience *eternal life*. We should also note that in his response to the question, Jesus tells the man what he must do to *live*. This brings to mind a passage from the 6th chapter of Paul's First Letter to Timothy, Paul's directive to those who are rich in things, that,

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that is really life.

Paul tells us to "take hold of the life that is *really* life." This echoes Jesus' teaching 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 deep connection with *all* people. He calls the man to reach out to those in need, *no matter who they are*. He calls him to cross tribal boundaries, the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and religion. 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. It is humbling to realize,

to acknowledge how pervasive and evil this matter of white supremacy is within us, within our culture, and how deeply it is imbedded in the institutions, the structures of our society.

For example, in one of the workshops that Corey and I attended in the 2023 Parliament of the World's Religions, the topic was how Hindu nationalism, a movement supported by India's present government, is determined to make India a Hindu nation. This has led to the persecution of both Muslims and Christians. One woman at the conference told us how her family, a Christian family of Indian ethnicity were driven from their homes by a Hindu mob, their house ransacked and burned, and how they were lucky to escape with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. This same dynamic of ethnic and religious repression, we learned, is being carried out by ultraconservative Jews in Israel in their establishment of an apartheid state where Palestinians have no rights, by Buddhists who are driving the Muslim Rohingya out of Myanmar, and by right-wing Evangelicals in their desire to make America not only a Christian country, but their kind of Christian country.

How can we respond to this movement? Jesus often employs what C. G. Jung called the *complexio oppositorum*, the complex of opposites that characterize the mystical teachings of all religions. For example, 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: heaven or earth: Jesus says "both." Which is more important: faith or works? Jesus says "both." Which is more important: the body or the mind? Jesus says "both." Which is more important: to be a citizen of our country or a citizen of the world? Jesus would say "both." Which is more important: to have secure borders or to reach out in compassion to refugees, to those in need? I think Jesus would say "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 to Martha comes a teaching about the two poles of faith—the active and the contemplative, service to others and growing in the faith.

As we heard this morning, 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 she is a victim, which is what she probably wanted to hear. He does not tell her that she is right and Mary is wrong, that Mary should be more like Martha. 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 disciple; she grows. Martha is an example of the active dimension of spirituality; Mary is an example of the contemplative dimension. 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. The question we should ask in relation to the *complexio oppositorum* is whether we are honoring both poles in our spiritual journey, or whether we are neglecting one of them. Like the lawyer, we are called to search, 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 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, compose 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, 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 affirm 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 Martha types in our congregation are as good as they are at serving because they have been and continue to be like Mary. 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, the life that is *really* life, and we will become the church that God wants us to be!

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

As I mentioned earlier this morning in my sermon, in the 6th chapter of Paul's First Letter to Timothy, Paul gives us a lesson regarding true stewardship. Paul addresses his directive to those who are rich in things, telling them that,

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that is really life.

The first part of this passage echoes Jesus' teachings about the importance of giving, of stewardship, and the danger of cultural or personal materialism. However, at the very end of the passage, Paul tells us to "take hold of the life that is *really* life." This echoes Jesus' teaching 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!

Paul is telling us that we can live an inauthentic life. We can live a life that is superficial, meaningless, egocentric, and self-serving. Many people do. However, Paul tells Timothy that there is a better way, a deeper meaning to life, a deeper meaning to our life. It involves building what Paul and Jesus called "a good foundation" in our faith, in our relationship with God through Christ Jesus. It also involves being rich in good works—or it gives rise to being rich in good works.

Let us, not only in our gifts to our church, but in our daily life "take hold of the life that is really life." When we do this, we will immediately realize the emptiness of our inauthentic life and how often we fill our inner emptiness with all kinds of junk.

It is in this spirit that we give, and it is in this spirit that we bless the gifts that we share this morning with our church and the many gifts we will share with the world in the week to come.