

Living a Coherent Life

Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

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*'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone*

-John Donne

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*

-William Butler Yeats

*Christ is before all things and in Him all things cohere.*

-Colossians 1:17

I wonder in our story today from Luke if Martha was asking herself, “Who’s my neighbor?” Had she heard Jesus tell the Good Samaritan parable? In Luke, the Good Samaritan is immediately before our story in our reading this morning. Perhaps Martha is asking herself, “Who’s my neighbor?” when she sees Jesus on the road with no place to stay, so she decides to put her love of neighbor into action by asking Jesus to stay with her and her sister, Mary?

Maybe Martha saw Jesus out on the road and said, “Why don’t you stay with us tonight? I make an outstanding pot roast and Mary will make her famous mashed potatoes; we’ll throw a salad together, some home-baked yeast rolls, and I’ll make one of my apple pies... Come on, stay with us. You could use the rest and besides, you look like you need a good, home-cooked meal.”

Meanwhile, Mary looks up from her book, saying to herself, “Uh-oh, there she goes again volunteering and volunteering me. Doesn’t she remember that she has a synagogue council meeting tonight?”

So Jesus goes to Martha and Mary’s home.

Martha gets busy putting her love in action by putting the pot roast in the oven and kneading the dough for her famous yeast rolls, but Mary, instead of coming into the kitchen and peeling potatoes, goes in and sits at Jesus’s feet listening to him tell stories and teach.

Sitting at the feet of the rabbi was the traditional place of disciples. And in that day and time, disciples were exclusively male. Yet, Mary is doing the discipleship thing. Here once more, Luke shows us Jesus and Jesus followers transgressing the conventional social and political lines of the day: Samaritans helping Jews out of a ditch, Jesus going into the home of these two unmarried women, and now a woman sitting at his feet.

And Martha gets aggravated at her sister. Is Martha aggravated that Mary is not helping her because she needs help in the kitchen? Probably. Is she aggravated that her sister is breaking traditional social barriers by sitting at Jesus feet? Probably.

Luke says many things distracted Martha, which adds another layer to her aggravation. You know what it’s like to be distracted by many things. You know what it’s like to be busy, too busy. And like Martha, you’re not busy with things that do not matter. You’re busy with good things, things that are important, things

that make a difference in this town, in kids' lives, in your family's lives, and things that make a difference in caring for God's creation. Even though these many things are good they are distracting. We are fragmented, feeling as if we're going in several directions at once. We understand Martha.

Let's pause here for a moment and use our imagination a little with Martha. Let's put ourselves in her shoes and walk around for a minute. Martha is obviously the "get-er-done" sister. She volunteers with the nearby homeless shelter and is in charge of the kitchen because she is the kind of person who everyone knows gets-it-done and she's a great cook. Although he's not mentioned in Luke, we know from John that Lazarus is the brother to Mary and Martha, and who will die in John 11, so perhaps Martha is the primary caregiver for her ailing brother. She serves on two committees at the Bethany synagogue and one day a week she volunteers with the elderly at the Bethany nursing home, and the mayor appointed her as chair of the committee on nursing home elder care reform. Next month she is to testify on elder care reform before the Roman Lt. Gov., but Caiaphas, the high priest in the Temple, is refusing to participate in the hearings because a woman is testifying. Meanwhile, the Roman Development Corporation is demolishing affordable housing in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, to make way for new high rent condos, Roman troops just killed five Jewish teenagers for throwing rocks at them, and she just received notice that Lazarus's insurance refuses to pay for his new medication. And the news reports that the governor, Pontus Pilate, says he is going to get tougher on Judea. He's going to raise taxes, send more troops to bring order, and crucify more troublemakers.

We understand Martha. We are Martha.

She is aggravated, distracted by too much. She's tired, overwhelmed, and reaching the end of her rope. She wants to snap at Mary but instead, goes around her sister directly to Jesus. "Lord, don't you care that Mary is not helping me in the kitchen? Tell her to help me. I need some help and she's in here, where she's not even supposed to be in the first place.

And Jesus responds, "Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things, but you need to do the one thing most important. Mary has chosen the best thing; the one thing essential."

This one story illustrates the tension we too often feel in the Christian life. And it is a tension throughout Christian history. On one hand we are to put love in action, serving, doing, giving... On the other hand, we are to love by sitting still, listening to Jesus, praying, meditating, centering – the one thing that gives us coherence.

Now like anything, we human beings take the good things of God and twist them to where everything gets out of whack. So the Martha parts of us get so busy doing good that we become distracted and angry. But Christian teaching has long known that we can't work for peace with an angry heart, and we can't work for justice when our busy, overwhelmed lives are motivated by hatred. Some of it is if we keep trying to do so much – and let there be no doubt – there is more than enough to do, but without being still in Christ, we burn out and become part of the problem. Many of us are burning-out and in despair right now.

Besides burn-out, distracted Christianity loses its way. With the fragmentation and disintegration of life, we frantically try to regain control. From

our personal lives to the wider society to the entire planet, we feel as everything is out of control. We don't even have time to stop and think, stop and pray, just stop and look at the big picture and regain our bearings. Each day brings new crises – another mass shooting, Christian nationalists taking over another school board, another young black man pulled over and shot, another scary decision by the Supreme Court, and while the planet is burning up, Sen. Manchin kills another modest bill aimed at climate change!

“Jesus, tell people to get involved! We need some help! Tell them to quit sitting! We need to register voters, write letters, organize, meet, get our act together, and together get active! Come on, Jesus! It is time to get busy!”

Now, let's take a deep breath and slow down and think about this. There is more going on here than perhaps we first believed. After all, we've just come from the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is all about love in action. Perhaps this story is about more than love that sits.

Those of us who prefer the Mary version of being Christian know that we can twist it too. We like the “spiritual-but-not-religious” approach. After all, the church is all too often, out of touch, out of date, and just out of it. We yearn for more spiritual ways. Maybe we just want to go to the woods and sit with the spirit?

But the spiritual life of followers of Jesus is never abstract. It must be embodied. Just like married love and the love of a parent, it is the love that is full of particularities and specifics of daily tasks. We love a child, and we show that love by spending time with them and hugging them and telling them how much we

love them. But we also show that love by washing their clothes, feeding them, driving them to band practice and so on. Love is practiced, embodied.

So let's not jump to conclusions too quickly. My old teacher Fred Craddock said, "If we censor Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether. And if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do. There is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment."

Discernment. Discernment, I think is getting at closer to what this story from Luke is about.

Mary discerns that though there was much to do to feed this rabbi welcomed into their home, she discerns that with Jesus, there is much more going on than just another rabbi. This is not simply important. It is the one thing essential. Not to listen to just anybody but to listen to Jesus. There is a time to work and serve and there is a time to sit, pray, and listen to Jesus. Knowing the difference is about discernment.

Part of the paradox is that only in being with Jesus, and listening to Jesus, are we able to discern what's going on in our lives and in this world. It is a matter of spiritual renewal, but it is also a matter of spiritual direction. Jesus Christ gives us the vision and point of view that puts everything in perspective. Jesus enables us to see how everything fits together and therefore, helps us know when to serve, when to listen, when to speak out, when to be quiet and learn, and when to take Sabbath rest. Not only when to speak but what to speak; not only when to act but how to act; not only what to do but also how to do. Being in Christ, keeps us

centered on the main thing. The one thing.

In our reading from Colossians, the Apostle Paul tells us that it is in Jesus Christ that the entire cosmos coheres. Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:15-17).

This same Christ, “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, in whom all things hold together” is sitting in her living room and Mary discerns that it is essential to sit at his feet. There are times when the mashed potatoes can wait, and this is one of them.

In Christ we discern what to do and how to do it. And it is Christ who sustains us when we’re doing it. No matter if we’re standing up for racial justice or feeding hungry people or sewing quilts for sick and dying people or teaching a child or singing a hymn, or trying to have a healthy marriage, the one thing most essential is that we root everything in Jesus Christ.

In 1611, in the middle of the Little Ice Age climate change, the bubonic plague pandemic, religious war, regime changes, assassination of kings, and widespread fear and chaos, John Donne wrote: “Tis all in pieces, all coherence is gone.” A little more than 300 years later, just as a world war had ended and the influenza pandemic was sweeping the world, William Butler Yeats wrote, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is

drowned;/The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity.” For both Donne and Yeats, our known world was fragmenting and was overwhelming us. Frantically we needed to regain control.

Black Baptist theologian Willie Jennings points out that the entire project of racism and segregation is part and parcel of the fragmentation and disintegration of the world into slices and pieces. Which also means that pieces and fragments, separation and segregation is easier for those with power to control or own or exploit (see Willie Jennings, *Acts. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p. 12).

I’m reminded that in the Exodus story, the Pharaoh’s empire was about control and a totalizing and imposed unity. God liberated the people of Israel from enslavement to that totalizing imposed order. Out in the wilderness, everything was changing, everything was up in the air – it was all in pieces, all coherence was gone. They Israelites had to learn to live amidst much chaos and incoherence on their way to the Promised Land where God would give them a new coherence.

That seems to be our world today, and our personal lives and hearts reflect the very incoherence and fragmentation of the wider world. Our job is not to try to regain control of our small piece or to bring order by getting our guns or trying to roll back time and try to return to the 1950’s when segregation had to do with control.

Our job is to stick with Jesus, act like Jesus, and be centered in Jesus. It is the work of Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, to bring a new coherence, joining, healing, reintegration, reconciliation, and reparation.



The testimony of the church through 2000 years, amidst all kinds of chaos, is that Christ Jesus joins the cosmos together and that includes us. This world is changing and much of it is not good, with crazies in Austin and Washington making decisions that affect the entire world. At the same time, there are many changes that are good. Let's not be so arrogant that we think our despair and pessimism knows how everything turns out. Let's take a deep breath and sit... sit at the feet of Jesus. Let's give up frantically trying to control and bring order. Listen to Jesus. God is at work.

Some of our sitting needs to come through counseling, individual or family. Some of it comes through learning to deal with our rage, face our depression, be honest about our White privilege, and a lot of asking for forgiveness in our families, work, and other relationships. Some of it comes through mindfulness training and learning to practice the presence of God in contemplative prayer.

Let us sit with Jesus. He knows all about our troubles. He walks with us and talks with us. He picks us up and turns us around and plants our feet on solid ground!

Jesus is our mind regulator. Our integrator and heart fixer. He gives strength to our hands and comfort to our feet. He is our friend at midnight. Our balm in Gilead. Our calm on the stormy sea. He is the lily of the valley, the bright and morning star. He's the fairest of ten thousand. He is our bread in a starving land.

Jesus knows what it means to be stopped and frisked even though he did nothing wrong. He knows what it's like to have no power and be accused of a

crime he didn't commit, to be ramrodded through a sham of a trial and then lynched on Calvary's tree.

But three days later, early on Sunday morning, the stone was rolled away, and Jesus was raised up. He was raised and lives today as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. In him all things were created. He is before all things and in him all things cohere.

Root ourselves, center our lives in him. He gives us the coherence we must have so we can go out there and join in what the Holy Spirit is already doing.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.