

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“The Faithfulness of Doing Nothing”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, July 21, 2019

Colossians 1:15-23

He 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. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.' 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.'

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to You and to the power of Your holy spirit. I pray that You would take the words that each of us have within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from scripture, as well as the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these words into the word of Jesus Christ. By the power of Your spirit, speak to each of us as we have need. By the mystery of Your spirit, whisper in our souls that we might hear You and trust You again. That we might be faithful to You and to our neighbors near and far. We ask all of this in Christ's name. Amen.

In a sense, it is my desire this morning to offer an ode to laziness. Or as the sermon title suggests, a reflection upon the faithfulness of doing absolutely nothing. It is my hope that this sermon is a poem or a reflection that lifts up the virtue in our busy world of taking time to breathe. To not be busy and to understand the benefits that come to those who have engaged in a practice of attentiveness or stillness. And let's just think for a moment about some of the benefits of stillness. Years ago on a trip to Cambridge, I went into the courtyard of Trinity College and saw the actual tree that Isaac Newton sat under when the apple fell down, popped him on the head, and he worked out his theory of gravitvity. I was only discouraged this week when I did a little bit of research and realized that Isaac Newton spent 20 years working out his theory of gravity. And I was even more discouraged to learn that the tree that I saw in the courtyard of Trinity College was not the tree that Isaac Newton sat under when the apple popped him on the head. And then I was even more discouraged to learn that an apple never actually popped him on the head [laughter].

I wondered, "Did Isaac Newton even go to Trinity College in Cambridge?" But he did. He grew up in Grantham, England, the son of farmers who had orchards. He had gone to school, then attended Cambridge beginning in 1661 and four years later as his studies were continuing the plague broke out, the school was closed and he was sent home. And according to a biographer that he spoke to, Newton shared the story that one evening after supper he decided to take his tea out into the orchard and just have a leisurely stroll among his family's property. As he was standing out in the orchard having his tea in the evening, thinking about nothing in particular, he watched an apple fall from the tree and go straight to the ground. He wondered to himself, "Why didn't that apple fall sideways? Or at a weird angle?" or even up. And upon his return to school the next year, he began to formulate his theory of gravity, that an apple, when it falls, falls straight to the ground. So maybe the story that we've all heard isn't true, but its

essence is true. Maybe it's not that he sat there, had the apple hit him on the head, and then, immediately said, "Oh, gravity." But his genius began to get provoked as he sat or stood, if you will, in a moment of stillness asking questions about what it was that was before him. The apple did fall straight down, but 20 years of hard work after that moment of insight bore the fruit of his observation. So maybe there is a place in our lives for stillness, for leisure, for laziness. Maybe the story about Mary and Martha that lifts up, in a sense, the virtue of Mary over the distractions of Martha speaks wisdom to us. I continued to hold this belief as I kept studying and ran across a classic that, in some sense, has almost been forgotten in the Christian theological enterprise.

Richard Baxter is a famous Puritan author of the same time, give or take, of Sir Isaac Newton, and in one of his books called *A Directory of Christian Exercise* appertaining to resolution, he says that stillness or contemplation is as much of a virtue in the Christian life as active engagement or obedience as he calls it. He sets up this paradox or at least explores the paradox between contemplation and active obedience that he finds in the Roman Catholic tradition. Now, many of us Protestants think that we as people of faith have abandoned the classic Roman Catholic ideas in order to claim those pure biblical truths. Baxter was a Puritan, a minister, an author, a serious person. And what he did was go back into this Catholic theology from a very Protestant and biblical point of view and examined is there virtue in the Mary way of life, the contemplative way of life. Much of our current understanding is that there is no virtue in a contemplative life, that there is little use in being lazy, of just thinking about things, of just sitting and not having a television or a newspaper or a book or a phone in front of us. But what Baxter realized is that these are equal graces in the life of Christians, that there are some who are called to be active and to be at work and that there are others person of a particular constitution or calling that are invited to be contemplative. He writes, "Some are much more called to the one than the other and we denominate from that which is most imminent and chief. We call that a contemplative life, what a person's state and calling alloweth and requireth of them, to make the exercises of their mind on things sublime and holy and effecting of their heart with them, to be their principal business, which taketh up the most of their time. We call this other the active, obedient life, when a person's state and calling requireth of them to spend the chief part of their time in some external labor or vocation, tending to the good of ourselves and the good of others. In a sense, the father of modern protestant evangelicalism says that there is much value in contemplation, that our call is not just to be active and obedient, to do God's will in those mission-types of ways, but that there's space in all of us, but maybe more in some of us, for quiet, for laziness, for allowing ourselves to open to the mystery of the spirit and her ephemeral workings in our lives. Maybe things aren't simply black and white. Maybe God's spirit shows us those in-between places. And it only does so when we are willing to let that spirit in and to trust that maybe it isn't all about just doing, doing, doing.

As I was thinking about that and wondering, "What is the modern equivalent of the contemplative life?" the most obvious example of that that just sprung out at me was Mary Oliver, the modern contemplative. A woman who would go out and spend the fullness of her days sitting in a field, or sitting at a beach, or laying down out somewhere under a tree and just observing what was before her. In a sense, the modern equivalent of Sir Isaac Newton strolling in his family vineyards. But rather than coming up with the theory of gravity, she came up with beautiful poetry. Poetry that speaks to a truth that isn't obvious at first blush. She writes, one day after laying in the trees, "When I am among the trees, especially the willows and the honey locust, especially the beech, the oaks, the pines, they give off such hints of gladness. I would almost say that they save me, and daily. I am so distant from the hope of myself in which I have goodness, and discernment, and never hurry through the world but walk slowly and bow often. Around me, the trees stir in their leaves and call out, 'Stay awhile.' The light flows from their branches and they call me again, 'It's simple,' they say, 'and you, too, have come into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.'" To go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.

Jesus says of Martha that she is distracted by many things and that Mary has chosen the better part. Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet. And as I came to the conclusion of what I was wanting to say, thinking that I wanted to express the virtue of stillness, or laziness, or contemplation, I woke up this morning, re-read my notes, thought to myself, "Yes, that's it." And then I read an article by Karoline Lewis who's a theologian up at Luther Seminary. She began by talking about Marsha Brady, of all people, and she said that we in our world are way too focused on being perfect, like Marsha Brady. Everything she did, she was striving to be perfect. And then the rest of her article was, "Why do we pit women against women in our culture?" As I read the article, I thought, "Yeah, that's a wonderful article, but I'm not sure that I can get up and preach about not pitting women against women." And as I was wondering how to fit this into the sermon, I had what I would call a "eureka" moment, the proverbial apple falling on my head. Jesus Christ showed up to both women. He shows up to both Martha and Mary because they let him in. Jesus talks to both Martha and Mary, to the busy, distracted, and to the one sitting at his feet. Jesus Christ doesn't divide. He talks to those of us who are busy and active, and he talks to us who are contemplative. He talks to us when we, as individuals, are both contemplative and active, if we let him in. So whether we complain, we listen, we interact, we cajole, we worry, we wonder, whatever it is, and wherever we are, what we need to remember, Jesus is here, if we let him, Jesus is here. Amen.