

Sermons at Christ Church

Love, Re-Imagined

Pentecost VI

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Thy hand is underneath my weary head, Thy strong right hand that saved me long ago; I'm cradled in Thy arms and comforted, What more have I to do with want or woe. Amen.

The better part-the infinite concern. There is also the finite concern, those that last but for a moment but carries with them deep anxieties. Mary has chosen the better part, and no one can take it away from her. When I was interviewing for my last position as Assistant Rector, my former Rector, asked me a question. We had spent the whole day talking, walking and exploring St. Paul's and Chestnut Hill. By late afternoon, he probably had a pretty good sense of who I as, and whether we can work together. He asked "Why do you want to work with me?" I answered with a cautionary tale by one of my professors who said "You should always look to work with an old wise priest."

The point of working with an old wise priest was to offer any priest the opportunity of learning the craft of wisdom-to discern the difference between the finite and infinite concern, and like Mary, be attracted to the values underpinning the infinite concern. The professor believed that an old priest who has been through the mill, if you will, would have built up a reservoir of experience. The kind that invariably makes wise the person who applies the self to that rhythm of life, a pattern of life which isn't soaked up or determined by the anxieties of finite concerns but one who like Mary brims and feels content with sitting at the feet of Jesus.

It is the kind of life which looks for the better part and latches on it like a hungry baby. It is the kind of life that promises itself that it shall not live by bread alone but by the word that comes from the mouth of God. The better part is the life that is anchored in the timeless values that brings out the best in the people whose lives are not shaped by the anxieties of their present circumstance.

Martha has been taken over by anxiety-finite concerns has taken over her. She wants to be hospitable and so she is busy cooking, knocking pots and pans all over. The kitchen is hot, she is

sweating up a storm. It feels like Thanksgiving morning where you know you will be feeding tons of people. She is exhausted, and needs help. She knows where her sister Mary is, and so she comes to Jesus with a complaint.

She thought Jesus would quickly dismiss Mary and ask her to join Martha in the kitchen-the place where it was believed that a woman belongs. But to her utter surprise, Jesus veers in a totally different direction. Martha, Martha, you are anxious and distracted by many things, there's one thing-just one thing that matters, and Mary has chosen that part-that one thing. Jesus doesn't condemn Martha for her enthusiasm in being hospitable, but he reprimands the anxiety caused by the fixation on those things which does not command any infinite concern, those things which are of finite concern and which can be taken away from us.

When we are concerned about something, it means we are involved and invested in it. A part of ourselves is in it, and we participate in it with our hearts. Whenever and wherever we are involved, we often feel this sense of anxiety. There are many things which may be of interest to us, which may provoke our compassion and horror. But they may not be our real concern, they may not produce the driving, torturing anxiety which is present when we are genuinely and seriously concerned.

Like Martha, we are concerned about many things. We are concerned about work; it is the basis of our existence. We may love it or hate it. We may fulfill it as a duty or as a hard necessity. But anxiety grasps us whenever we feel the limits of our strength, our lack of efficiency, the struggle with our laziness, and the danger of failure.

We are also concerned about our relationships with others. We cannot imagine living without their benevolence, friendship, love, and communion in body and soul. We are often worried and in utter despair when we think about the indifference, the outbursts of anger and jealousy, the hidden and often poisonous hostility we experience in ourselves as well as those we love. The anxiety about losing them, about having hurt them, and about not being worthy of them creeps into our hearts and makes our love restless. Similarly, we are concerned about ourselves. We feel responsible for our development towards maturity, towards strength in life, wisdom in mind, and perfection in spirit. We strive for happiness and about having a good time. But our anxiety strikes us when we look at ourselves in the mirror of self-scrutiny or of the judgments of others. We feel that we have made the

wrong decision, that we started on the wrong road, that we are failing before others and before ourselves. We compare ourselves with others and feel inferior to them, and we become depressed and frustrated. We believe we have wasted our happiness either by pursuing it too eagerly, or by not being courageous enough to grasp the right moment for a decision which might have brought us some semblance of joy.

The question is, why are there many things about which we are concerned, connected with worry and anxiety? Like Martha, we give those things our devotion, our strength, our passion, and we must do so; otherwise we would not achieve anything. But why then do these finite concerns make us restless in the deepest ground of our hearts, and why does Jesus dismiss them as not being ultimately needed?

As Jesus indicates in his words about Mary, it is because these concerns are finite, they can be taken from us. All our concerns come to an end; all our concerns are finite. In the short span of our lives many of them have already disappeared and new ones have emerged which will also disappear. Many great concerns of the past have vanished and more will come to an end, sooner or later.

Both the things of which we are concerned and our own selves will come to an end. There will be a moment, and perhaps not too far away, when we shall no longer be dealing with any of these concerns, when the finitude of these concerns will be revealed in the experience of our own life's end. Think about the prophet Amos. He prophesies that the Jews will be carried into exile, but in the same breath also hints of their return-finite concerns do come to an end.

The tragedy is, like Martha, we maintain our finite concerns as if they were the infinite concern. And they keep us in their grasp if we try to free ourselves from them. Every concern is tyrannical and desires our whole heart, our whole mind and our whole strength. Every little concern tries to become the infinite concern-our god. The concern about our work often succeeds in becoming our god. The concern about money has become an even more important god. But these concerns are finite, they conflict with each other, and burden our consciences. There's only one thing that we need-infinite concern.

There are moments in our lives when we have to make a choice between that which is important and that which is necessary. While Martha's fixation with her preliminary concerns led her to choose that which was important, Mary's fixation with the ultimate concern led her to choose that which was necessary-the better part, that one thing which we all need-God doesn't cause anxieties in us or among us. The better part is always necessary because it is that part which teaches our eyes how to see the world. It is that part which keeps us grounded in the reality that we do not have to face the events of our lives all by ourselves alone, nor does our Christian faith insulate us from any kind of danger, rather; it teaches us how to face those dangers should they come. Again, it is the better part that puts us and keeps us in touch with each other because we come to realize that our lives are only special when the other's life is as special as ours.

There's only one thing we need. Jesus said. And the one who is grasped by that one thing has the many other things under their feet. They are concerned about all that is important and necessary but they aren't consumed with anxiety over them. Anxiety's power is broken and cannot destroy that person again. And when such a person loses everything, he or she doesn't lose the one thing they need because it cannot be taken away from them-no one can take God away from you. Amen.