



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Martha, Martha_ - The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost - 7_17_2022

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things."

I speak to you as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

I have always found this gospel irritating. I have found it irritating because what Martha is asking Jesus to do is simply an expression of justice, to simply recognize the fact that she has welcomed Jesus into her home and her sister, who very likely is living with her, is doing nothing and sitting on her bottom, listening to Jesus while she's doing all the work. And so she's appealing to Jesus saying, Lord, will you please tell my sister to get up and help me with all of this serving? And it would be so easy for Jesus to say, hey Mary, I'll catch you up on this later. Martha needs you. Right?

But no, Jesus, doesn't say that at all. And I find this irritating because, newsflash, I identify with Martha. I am a worker. I am not just a worker in the fact that I spend a lot of hours at work. I live to work. I don't work to live. I love work. It's knit into me from a kind of psychosocial, genetic family perspective. I am the descendant of immigrants. I am from New England. I am a worker. That's what I do. And that's what I enjoy. I do not have hobbies. I do not have pastimes. I do not have a stamp collection. I work. That's what I do. I work, I drink coffee, I go to the gym, and then I do the honey-dos that Claire gives me. That's what gives me life and purpose, it's work.

And you should try it sometime. It's wonderful. Just kidding. I suspect a lot of you work as well. That's what many of us do. It gives us joy. It makes us feel complete. We get a lot done and it's for the most part satisfying. And so when we invest so much of ourselves in what we do, we tend to feel a little bit caught up when someone would say something like what Jesus said to Martha, it can feel like we're being shamed for being who we are.

I have been built for work. I love to work. I do not have hobbies. I have outlets. If I took up golf, I would make golf work. That's just the way I am. And I received an insight into my own psyche from a student I had, a mature student I had when I was teaching in Tennessee. She turned to me and she said, you know, some men are like dogs. They need to work. If they're not working, they sit and they chew their tails and they lose their minds. And I said, that's very nice, C+.

But it was incredibly insightful because working is what I do, but I also know that there are ways in which my work can be incredibly self-constituting, and a source of joy. And there are ways in which my work can be a way of killing myself slowly from the inside. And that wonderful part of me that loves to work comes from a kind of way of being that sees work as a kind of worship.

Ian McEwan, the great novelist who wrote some of the more important pieces of fiction in the early 21st century, studied every profession to find out which profession had the highest level of happiness among the people who practice it. And he discovered it was brain surgeons who were the happiest people. Why? Because their work called out so much of them that they forgot themselves. And when we are working well, when we are fully immersed in a task, when we're committed to a purpose larger than ourselves, our work can be a source of joy. We forget ourselves. We live for things beyond ourselves and that's wonderful.

But work can also be a source of a kind of spiritual death. When we begin to worship our work, things tend to fall apart and we become obsessed with our compensation. We become obsessed with our status. We become obsessed and distressed by the office politics and all the ways we are either respected or disrespected. Work can be a source of spiritual death. It can draw us away.

And the key defining our way to that constructive point of work in our lives, the key to seeing work as a positive in our life is found in today's gospel. The key is not, as the culture will tell us, to try to balance. Telling me to try to balance my life does mean no good. It's just another source of shame. But the key is to actually see my work as a category of my worship of God, because that's the problem that Martha had. It's not so much that she was working. It's that her work distracted her. That's the word that is used in the scripture when it says, but Martha was distracted by her many tasks. The Greek for that is *perispaó*. It's the only time in the New Testament that that Greek word is used, *perispaó*. And it means literally to be drawn away.

So the tension in today's gospel is not that Martha was active and Mary was contemplative. The tension is not that Martha was working hard and Mary was sitting quietly, because we don't know if she was sitting quietly. She could have been asking questions. The tension is that Jesus had entered her house and she was drawn away rather than drawn towards Jesus. And that is an important lesson for all of us who work. And all of us do work. The work that we do has to be a way in which we enter into worship of something greater than ourselves, of God. And when our work becomes worship, it becomes something that will eat us alive.

And I want to lift up before you two examples of that to maybe help us along this morning. Because the questions that you and I have to ask ourselves today is what is our work and what is our worship? What is the work that God has given

us to do? And what is the way that we can make our work and our lives one of worship.

The first is the painting that you have on your bulletin and that our wonderful tech team is going to flash for those of you at home, right around here. It's by Peter Aertsen and it's an incredible classic piece. It's in a museum in Amsterdam, and it was done at the end of the Northern Renaissance in the beginning of the kind of reformation time period. The time of Bruegel, for example,

And Aertsen does this tableau, which you'll see in other great paintings of this period, in which you see almost a kitchen scene of everyday life. And in the left side of the scene, you see this biblical image like a kind of tile that might be hanging in the kitchen of Christ with Mary and Martha. And then in front of it, you have this incredible table laden with all of the things that are getting ready for a major feast. And so you have this enormous ham that's right in the middle of the painting. It's practically the showstopper of the whole piece. And then you have napkins on the side and you have other things that are ready. You have a plate, you have all these that are meant to convey that there is a feast about to be prepared.

And art historians, when they comment on this painting, they note its technical skill. But they don't like it very much because the ham is so large. They think the ham overwhelms the painting, it ruins the balance in it. And some have argued as well that this was Aertsen's attempt to kind of comment on the emerging bourgeoisie of Amsterdam, who were getting all of this prosperity and all of this privilege and money and had somehow lost sight of the deeper things going on.

And while those are probably interesting things to see, they both missed the point entirely because Aertsen is trying to show that when the ham gets too large in our lives, we tend to forget that biblical story of Jesus and Mary and Martha, because we can get confused between the work that is ahead of us, the wealth that we accumulate, the wonderful things that bring us goodness and love in this world and the things that are truly worthy of worship, which is Christ.

And the ham is actually well chosen. It's supposed to loom large because ham is one of those things you have to work for. You can't just have pork. With ham, you have to take pork, you have to salt it. You have to hang it in a safe place. You have to wait, you have to find something else to eat. And then when the time comes, you have an incredible feast where the ham is broken open, and everybody feasts and rejoices.

So Aertsen in placing that ham so large is a reminder to us of the things that draw us, the things that will distract us, that will draw us away from God. These things need to be less in our lives. And we need to turn to that God who we sometimes have a tendency to push to the corner and lose and treat as a given and not a gift.

The second image I want to paint before you today is not so much an image, but it's actually a passage from a commencement speech that David Foster Wallace gave at Kenyan College in 2005. Wallace is one of the great American writers and fiction writers of the 20th century. He died in 2008 from suicide after years of depression. And he remains one of the most powerful commentators on American culture. And in 2005, he was at Kenyan College and he gave a speech. And in that speech, he wrote the following:

"Here's something else that's weird, but true. In the day to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship, be it JC or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan Mother Goddess or the four noble truths or some inviable set of ethical principles is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age starts showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.

On one level. We all know this stuff already. It's been codified in myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables, the skeleton in every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth upfront in daily consciousness. Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid and you'll need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, and you'll end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.

But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they are unconscious. They're default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing. And the so-called real world will not discourage you from operating on your default settings because the so-called real world of men and money and power hums merrily along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and worship of self.

Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom, the freedom to be lords of our tiny skull-sized kingdoms alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it, but of course there are all different kinds of freedom and the kind that is most precious, you will not hear much talk about in the great outside world of wanting and achieving. The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to

care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad, petty, unsexy ways every day. That is real freedom.

And that is what Mary had. Mary was free to let go of everything and to focus on Jesus. And that's the kind of freedom that eluded Martha. What is your work? What is the work that you alone have been given to do? What do you worship? How can your work be a form of worship rather than an object of your worship? What liberates you, drawing closer to Jesus or being drawn away?

Amen.