Holy Leisure  
Luke 11:38-42  
A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 21, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

There are 70 things to do.

The “Ultimate Durham Checklist” in Durham Magazine’s Official 2013 Relocation Guide lists 70 things to do. Number 21 is “Attend a service at Duke Chapel”. Yes, it should be number 1! Number 50 is “Check out the art museum at N.C. Central University” and last, number 70, is “Take in a Bulls game from the comfort of Tobacco Road Sports Café.” A Bulls games is also listed as number 1. In between, in this list of wonderful activities, nearly half of the items are related to food. Thirty-three restaurants, cooking classes, markets are highlighted. We take food seriously! No wonder Durham is named a “foodie” city.¹

How do you suppose Martha would fare here?

Martha is a diligent hostess, honoring her guest in the way that custom dictates. Whether she is preparing food, pouring beverage or straightening the home we don’t know, but we do know what it is like to prepare for a guest, especially an honored guest. I think Martha would understand a foodie city, one that enjoys special meals and welcomes people to the table.

Our scriptural focal point for this morning is the story of Mary and Martha. Jesus comes to these sisters as a house guest. Martha spends her time busily being a hostess, while her sister sits at the feet of Jesus listening to him speak. When Martha can no longer contain her resentment, she pleads with Jesus saying “Lord, don’t you care that I am doing all this work by myself? Make Mary help me.” You can almost hear the whine in her voice. “It’s not fair.” Jesus’ response seems to be to be said with love and compassion, “I know you are worried and distracted, but Mary has made a good choice.”

The ping pong-like dialogue in this short passage, which bounces from what Martha did to what Mary did, from she said to what he said, can help us reflect on our own lives, considering their balance, or lack thereof. It can also prompt us to consider the concept of *otium sanctum*, that is “holy leisure”.

I would like to highlight two parts of today’s text. First, notice that while Martha’s request is not granted, her activities in and of themselves are not criticized. In the ancient world hospitality was highly valued, and hospitality, then as now, requires work such as preparing a meal or guest room. Likewise, Martha is not described as being obsessive or compulsive about her efforts as if she was fussing about the tiniest of details regarding setting the table.² Furthermore, if you look at the context of this story you will see that activity in and of itself is not criticized. The story that immediately precedes this is that of the Good Samaritan. The passage ends with Jesus telling the lawyer, “go and do likewise”. Dean Lowry preached on this text last week, encouraging us to stop asking who are neighbor is and to start being neighbor to all we meet. Clearly this is a call for active compassion. Likewise, this chapter in Luke tells of Jesus sending out 70 people to visit towns and villages in his name. It is effort and work -- going and doing which was initiated by Jesus. No, Martha’s efforts were not bad or wrong, but in this context, Mary has chosen the better part.

In our culture, we understand Martha. We appreciate work and productively. We admire those who set goals and reach them. We are impressed by achievement. In our spiritual lives, some of us may identify with Martha.

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While we may not always be good at it, we want to **do** something to help our neighbors or ease the suffering of those around us. These are wonderful inclinations and essential part of our Christian life.

Yet -- Mary also represents that which is essential for us.

Mary chose to sit at the feet of Jesus. Jesus welcomed her and affirmed her in this. Here is the second thing to notice about this passage. Jesus affirms Mary in her attention to his words. He affirmed her as someone willing to learn from him, to be his student, to be his disciple. A disciple was one who sat at the feet of their teacher. Women did not have that opportunity in the ancient world so this is dramatic scene. Jesus affirms a woman as a learner, just as I believe he affirms all of us, whether or not we feel worthy enough or smart enough or faithful enough to learn from him. In saying that Mary has chosen the better part, Jesus is affirming an individual, in the choice to sit and listen and he is also affirming the use of time for this purpose. Yes, he is saying, all may sit at my feet and learn, irrespective of what the society may say about you, and it is a good use of time, no matter what others think.

In the history of the Christian church, there has been tension between the active life and the contemplative life. Martha or Mary?

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas addressed this question directly. In responding to “whether the active life is more excellent than the contemplative” he gives eight reasons why the contemplative life is superior. His reasoning includes the assertion that the contemplative life is more intellectual, more continuous, and more delightful. He, like many of his predecessors, was convinced that in every way the contemplative life was the “better part”, because in such a life the focus is entirely on the truth, beauty and goodness of God. Aquinas was convinced that there could not be any better use of human life than to spend it focused on the majesty and mystery of God.

Those who strive to live the contemplative life hear God say to them “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:1) and join the Psalmist is proclaiming. “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.” (Psalm 119:97)

Some of our spiritual ancestors were convinced that Mary literally had chosen the better part. Such an affirmation does not seem widespread today. When social, political, and personal needs are well known, we are inclined to get busy and take on the work. Time spent in meditation or prayer can seem a frivolous waste of time when there is work to be done.

Why does it have to be either/or? Can’t it be both/and?

We need to work and serve, but we also need to sit at our Lord’s feet. There is a time to put aside tasks and distractions and like Mary to quietly listen to God. This picture of Mary points to “holy leisure”.

The term “holy leisure” literally means “holy free time” and comes from the very early church. In its earliest uses it was used to describe those who were freed from ordinary duties in order to spend time in prayer and study. A modern understanding of the concept comes from an article by Dr. Peggy Hothem. Hear her words:

> What do I mean by holy leisure? It emphasizes the sacredness of a slow reflective attitude and experience. It goes beyond mere amusement, diversion, entertainment, or a slothful passing of time to create the soil for contemplation. It's a detachment from the inner compulsion to be constantly busy. In a

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3 Interpretation: Luke  Fred Craddock p. 151

world of doing and more doing, holy leisure gives space for our imaginations and curiosities, transforming ordinary insight into a sense of wonder and delight. It makes room in one's life to listen more and meditate on what's important.

By encouraging leisure not as mere diversion or another busy activity, but as the concept of a holy pause, we're inviting others to a restorative peace, to step back from the fast pace of modern life. When we rest in this still place, we are more likely to hear the questions we should be asking of ourselves, as well as the still, quiet voice of God.⁵

Holy leisure as a combination of rest and worship which is the counter balance to the activities and responsibilities we have chosen. It is choosing to spend time in God’s presence in a way that restores our souls, temporarily setting aside all of the distractions of the day. This kind rest in God’s presence nurtures an awareness of God in every day, and in ordinary life, helping us grasp the purpose of life, a definition of which is simply “to glorify God and enjoy God forever.”⁶

Augustine, in the City of God, writes of holy leisure in the context of the interrelationship between the active and the contemplative life.

No [one] has a right to lead such a life of contemplation as to forget in his own ease the service due to his neighbor; nor has any [one] a right to be so immersed in active life as to neglect the contemplation of God. … holy leisure is longed for by the love of truth; but it is the necessity of love to undertake requisite business. If no one imposes this burden upon us, we are free to sift and contemplate truth; but if it be laid upon us, we are necessitated for love’s sake to undertake it. And yet not even in this case are we obliged wholly to relinquish the sweets of contemplation; for were these to be withdrawn, the burden might prove more than we could bear.⁷

Augustine claims that love for truth and our desire for holy leisure compels us to sit at our Lord’s feet, and without this time of listening and learning, we may find the burdens of service too much to bear. If we are always serving, while refusing to receive, we may grow weary in our well-doing, or worse, find ourselves bitter and cynical.

This morning, the scripture points us to Mary. It points us to the need for balance in our lives. It is tempting to think that we just need the right context before we can find a balanced life. When I finish my degree, when I have the right job, when the children are grown, when I am feeling better, when this project is done, then I will be able to balance my life better and have time for the sweets of contemplation.

There is no magic time in which balance easy, but to some degree we have the freedom to choose how to spend our time. Perhaps we can be more intentional about balancing our lives, so that we can live with a deeper sense of the Holy. Perhaps we can be more honest with ourselves about our priorities and commitments, and make deliberate, conscious choices about how we use our time. Perhaps we need to hear Jesus giving each of us permission to find time and space for holy leisure.

We can start today. Here in this hour of worship we may focus our minds on God, who is wondrously Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. In this day, we may pause to pray at any moment, knowing that God is always more ready to hear our prayers that we are to pray. And today, at this communion table, we meet our Risen Lord, who has offered himself for us. Here in this sacrament we pause, setting aside all that would distract us, so that we

⁶ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 1
may receive. The work for this special meal is already done; Christ himself is the host who welcomes all who will come.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, invites us to a holy leisure, to sit at his feet, to listen, to learn, to rest and to be fed.

It is an invitation we have every reason to accept.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.