

Quickening The Life of the Mind

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost, July 21, 2019

I can only imagine how many homilies we all have heard on Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42.) One popular approach has been that, like Mary, we need to stop busily running around like chickens-with-our-heads-cut-off and just sit in the presence of Jesus, taking in his love and wisdom, letting them broaden our horizons, so that our "doing" doesn't get disconnected from our "being." Another popular approach has been that Martha would have been able to spend much more time just **being** and **learning**, if she hadn't been coerced by her patriarchal culture into doing all the laborious work that men didn't want to.

I am quite sure that there is truth in each of these approaches. But there is a "back story" here -- a *perspective* that Jesus is using, which is important to understand. It is a perspective that we seldom hear named in the church, often only behind closed doors in seminaries. But it is a perspective that has profoundly influenced our scriptures and traditions, and is at the root of our core values and practices. It is a perspective that so completely surrounds us that we cannot see it, like fish cannot see the water in which they live.

It is a "classical" perspective, which has its origins in Ancient Greece, long before the birth of Jesus. And because this classical perspective was very powerful and spiritually helpful, it had a **profound** influence on Judaism in the time of Jesus. Rabbis had taken it up, reflected on it very carefully & prayerfully, and used it to explore their own faith more deeply than they could have without it. In the process, they began to **transform** this Greek perspective in light of the divine truths revealed to the Jewish people. The result was a new perspective that was no longer simply Greek or Jewish, but an inspired hybrid of the two. A synthesis. It has been called "Hellenistic" Judaism, or "Greek-Influenced" Judaism. The justification for these Jewish rabbis' mindfully "borrowing" from Ancient Greek philosophy was later summed up in the words of St. Augustine: "All truth... is God's truth."

We have good reason to believe that the rabbis with whom Jesus trained so intensively in his youth -- and who were so very impressed with his understanding -- were Hellenistic Jews. Rabbis who were steeped in this Judaism that had further developed Greek philosophy in light of divine revelation. One reason for believing this is so is that so many of Jesus' teachings reflect a seamless integration of Jewish and Greek thought. And this is quite a radical discovery. It suggests that Jesus was not simply a Jew, but a Hellenistic Jew, who actively used an inspired version of Greek philosophy in his life and teachings. We see this very clearly in the story of his visit to Mary and Martha. But before we explore that story, let me first offer you just a tiny bit of Ancient Greek history to put it into context.

Ancient Greek society was advanced in many ways. It held that the highest aim of humanity was the loving pursuit of wisdom and the active living of a virtuous life, according to that wisdom. They unfolded for the Western world the crucial importance of "the life of the mind," and its cultivation through a process of holistic education. Holistic in the sense that, for them, "the life of the mind" included reason & emotion & respect of the physical body. They went so far as to claim that if the life of the mind was **not** cultivated, there could be no civilization, no truly human society, whatsoever. Only barbarism would result.

This is quite impressive, and I would have to say that I agree with it. But before we get **overly** impressed with Ancient Greek society, we should recognize that it was also profoundly unjust. Only the elite, the aristocracy, had **access** to the resources required to cultivate the life of the mind.

For, the theory was, that **only they** had minds worth cultivating. For example, the minds of women -- even the wives of the elite -- were seen as incapable of such development. And the minds of slaves were seen as not real minds at all. The best these unfortunates could hope for was for their actions to be ruled by elite men who could actually **understand** what was best for them. And this became their recipe for a smoothly functioning society, a place where the ignorant masses followed the conventions created by the elite, or were punished accordingly. This became their vision of civilization. So, in this sense, it was a **two class system**: there were those defined as **contemplative** (who were the only ones equipped *to rule*) and those defined as merely **conventional** (who were only equipped *to be ruled*.)

Now Jesus, and the Hellenistic Jews before him, easily embraced the Greek view that the highest aim of humanity was the loving pursuit of wisdom and the active living of a virtuous life according to that wisdom. This was foundational in their own wisdom literature. They easily embraced the view that cultivating the life of the mind was the crux of a good life, and they deepened and transformed this view with their understanding of **the spiritual ties** between the life of the mind and the Life of God.

But they had great problems with the Ancient Greek vision of civilization and how it came into being. For the rabbis understood the Promised Land as a place where the captives were set free, where the high and mighty were humbled, and the humble were exalted. A place where everyone (including the poor, the despised, and the rejected) would have the resources, and the responsibility, to cultivate the life of the mind. A place where even male and female slaves would be full of wisdom. And so they discerned that the great insights of the Greeks on *the life of the mind* were only **potentially** wise, that **without** love of God and all of God's children, their insights became foolishness. But **with love**, their great potential for wisdom could be wonderfully realized.

For us, all of this visioning comes to a head in Jesus, in his bringing *good news to the poor*. There are many aspects of this "good news", but one we seldom hear about is how Jesus was radically elevating the condition of humanity by *recognizing* and *quickenning* and *cultivating* the life of the mind within all persons (including women, children, slaves, and even those deemed unfit for conventional society.)

In our day it may sound strange to us that Jesus was at all interested in "the life of the mind." Wasn't he, after all, most concerned with the "heart" ? It is common in our day to make a sharp distinction between the heart and the mind, and sometimes even to suggest that that the mind is good but the heart is bad -- or that the heart is good but the mind is bad. But these are modern views, and not helpful ones. In the ancient world, the "heart" described the innermost core of the mind, that deepest "place" in the mind where the things we hold most dear and take most seriously are kept. So the heart is part of "the life of the mind," the most important part.

For Jesus, **every** child of God was a *contemplative*, waiting to be born. **Every** child of God was created with the capacity for the loving pursuit of wisdom and the active living of a virtuous life according to that wisdom. **Every** child of God was created to become loving and wise, like his or her Father in heaven. And the "new society," the invisible kingdom, where all would have the resources to do so, was now **becoming flesh**... in his life, in his teachings, in his death, in his resurrection, in the birthing of his Church -- his Body on earth, who through their reliance on him, would overturn the foundations of "the world," the foundations of all false societies of masters-and-slaves. Good news for the poor indeed.

The story of Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha contains many truths, but when we understand this "back story," perhaps the core truth it reveals is **Jesus' mission to raise up true contemplatives**,

especially among those who had been conditioned by "the powers that be" to believe that *the life of the mind* was not for them, that it was beyond their station and their reach, that the most they could ever aspire to in this life was compliance with the conventions of their assigned roles to prevent their being dehumanized even further.

This tragic hopelessness is the formidable obstacle that Jesus is enabling Mary and Martha to overcome. And the core value he is conveying is quite clear. It is **better** to become genuinely wise and loving than to mindlessly follow the conventions of "the world" -- even when those conventions are dressed up in religious clothing. It is **better** to recognize and cultivate the God-given **life of your mind** than to be made into a mere tool of the "worldly" status quo. In this simple story, Jesus is subtly imparting to the Church the *best wisdom* of Ancient Greek philosophy -- but, at the same time -- he is *dismantling* the violent foundations of Western civilization. He is showing us that becoming a true contemplative and actively working for social justice are two sides of the same gospel coin.

The implications of this are massive. Contemplative life is no longer owned by the "leisure class." It is a life which **all** are welcome to share. For **all** have the God-given potential to recognize and cultivate the life of the mind within them, *if only they are given the right context to do so*. And, in this simple story, we are given a new, divine image of what this right context is.

It is the freedom to sit and to listen, the freedom to contemplate and understand the life-changing words and deeds of Jesus -- the One who *only says* and *only does* what the Father is saying and doing. It is the freedom to let Jesus become our own personal Rabbi. To let him nurture the life of our minds within the Life of God. It is the freedom to be well educated by his love and wisdom. This freedom is the context in which the Church is born. It is the context we are called to enjoy -- to live & move & have our being in. It is the context we are called to co-create with God for others, especially for the most vulnerable in the world around us.

We are being offered here a vision of Christianity as a *contemplative*, not a *conventional* way of life (as it has largely become in our day.)

Why did Jesus feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, stand in solidarity with the oppressed? To free them.... whether or not they used that freedom to sit and listen, to contemplate and understand... although he clearly hoped they would, because **that** would free them in a far deeper way (John 8:32).

Why do we come to church? Why do we pray? Why do we engage in Christian fellowship? Why do we study the scriptures? -- *if not to be freed and quickened, if not to cultivate **the life of our minds in Christ***? As we actually do this, it transforms our lives for the better, and the lives of all those who are influenced by our actions. And that is very good news indeed. Thanks be to God.

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