

# Sermon

## Contemplation & Action

A Sermon for First Presbyterian Church

Sunday, July 17, 2022

6th Sunday After Pentecost

### Prayer for Illumination:

**Some of us, Lord, are prone to race off on quixotic adventures before we know for sure what you desire. We “race in where angels would fear to tread,” and begin *doing* without recalling that *you* must have “first place in everything.”**

**Others of us, Lord, are never moved beyond our comfort-zone. We prefer to think and stew and chew upon the facts of our world without ever engaging in acts which might help to redeem it — without ever helping you to establish your “kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.”**

**Speak to us today in our over-zealous busyness and in our self-indulgent indolence. As we listen to the word read and proclaimed, help us to find the faithful tension between contemplation and action. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

*Col. 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 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. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 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. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 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.*

*Col. 1:21 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— 23 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.*

*Col. 1:24 I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. 25 I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

*Luke 10:38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 40 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." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; 42 there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

**I. In the wake of all that has been happening in our world this Summer . . .**

- A. I am put in mind of a quote often attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower, but which more properly belongs to Hollywood producer Martin Gabel who, in 1945, saw an actress at a dress rehearsal waving her arms frenetically in a scene and who called out, “*Don’t just do something, stand there!*”**
- B. It is precisely when, because of our fear, or our discomfort, or maybe even because of our righteous indignation that we are prone to act — that wisdom suggests we take a deep breath, and wait.**
- C. It is a good time for all of us to follow Mr. Gabel’s advice and “*Don’t just do something, stand there!*”**

**II. Though to be fair - One could argue that he borrowed this sentiment from biblical faith.**

**A. Psalms**

*Psa. 37:7 Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices.*

*Psa. 46:10 “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”*

**B. Exodus**

*Exodus 14:14 The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”*

**C. The Prophet Isaiah advising the king...**

*Is. 30:15 For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*

**D. The Apostle Paul - reflecting on his own life**

*Rom. 7:21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.*

**E. Luke in this story about Mary & Martha**

**III. Context**

**A. If last week (parable of the Samaritan ) we were learning that listening without putting our beliefs into action was empty hypocrisy ...**

**B. This week we are balanced by the conviction of the very next story Luke tells which suggests that acting without deep listening is equally problematic.**

**IV. Jesus arrives at home with two people at odds**

**A. Martha is busy doing the “many tasks” and “all the work” which the maintenance of household requires *and she is resentful.***

**B. One could argue that if Mary was truly listening to the things Jesus said, she would have felt a compulsion to get up and help her sister with the many things which needed to be done, and if you made that argument *I would be on your side.***

**C. But Jesus, responds to Martha’s complaint by saying that Mary has made the better choice and he will not take that “better portion” from her.**

**1. Shocking. Isn’t he on the side of a fair distribution of labor?**

**V. Sigmund Rhea, Michael Fishbane, Thomas Merton, Jesus.**

- A. Sigmund Rhea - The Presbyterian Church has done so much to bear the fruit of the Spirit into the world,**
- 1. from taking the lead in social justice,**
  - 2. to being decades ahead of most other Christians on the question of ecology & theology,**
  - 3. to our well-known ministries to address hunger world-wide.**
- BUT WE ARE IN DANGER now of losing our vitality because we have been so focussed on fruits that we have neglected our “roots” of prayer, and disciplines of faith-formation.**
- B. Michael Fishbane - Jewish theologian out of Chicago - Sacred Attunement.**
- 1. To be *mindful people* in a *mindless world*.**
- C. Thomas Merton —**

*“Those who attempt to act and do things for others . . . without deepening their own self-understanding, freedom and capacity to love, will have nothing to give others. They will communicate to others nothing but the contagion of their own obsessions, their aggressiveness, their ego-centered ambitions, their delusions about ends and means, their doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.”*

### **From Contemplation in a World of Action**

**D. Jesus — Theme for ASP group**

*John 15:4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be*

*done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

**VI. So, our listening must be balanced by actually doing something “Faith without works is dead” BUT our actions must grow from our abiding in our Lord.**

**††† This is the lively tension between last week’s “go and do likewise,” and this week’s “she has chosen the better part.”**

**Great people of faith from the earliest centuries of Christendom to modern voices have understood this lively and faithful dance between action and contemplation.**

**A. It is not enough to do.**

**B. It is not enough to pray only either.**

**Our action must remain connected to the vine or we will bear none of the fruits of the Spirit.**

**Our prayers must be the taproot from which we grow into a life of selfless service in a hurting world.**

**C. Then our discipleship will grow into the promise of Christ that his joy may be in us, and that our joy may be complete.**