

## SOUL SERVICE AND SOCIAL SERVICE

Texts on Sunday, February 6, 2011

*Isaiah 1:10, 12-17; Luke 10:25-42*

Can a person turn a bad situation to a good one? Can we be of help? When we've just heard the good Samaritan story; when we've heard the prophet's demand that we cease to do evil and learn to do good, an affirmative answer may seem the obvious, even the necessary choice. But slow the boat! The stories of the good neighbor and of Martha's mumbling against her sister Mary number among the best remembered—but did you know these stories are themselves neighbors? This isn't just journalism, as if one day Jesus told a good story, and the next he visited Martha Stewart in a dither over a dinner setting, and we've got the record of these things. Luke made these stories neighbors to help the church work out a puzzle. We usually read the good Samaritan story all alone, ending with Jesus' "Go and do likewise" as *the* answer to the lawyer's question, How shall I inherit eternal life? But the lawyer's first answer, which Jesus affirmed, had two parts. First, love God; second, love your neighbor as yourself. Luke has not left us without the master's guidance on how to love God with your whole heart. That is why we read on this morning.

"Martha, Martha!" We must hear ourselves addressed. "You are worried and distracted by many things—but only one thing is needful, and Mary has chosen it. It will not be taken from her." There *is* a priority in the two great loves. You might call it "soul service before social service." Not—soul service *more important* than social service; just, soul service first, then social service, in a virtuous cycle, every round going higher, higher. Return to learn to love God with your all in all, and you will see your neighbor in ways ever-renewed, and act with God's will. Putting the Mary and Martha story right after "the good Samaritan," Luke aims to wake us up from our headstrong assumption that we already know how to love, already know what to do to turn a bad situation. Oh no! says the Lord. Oh no! says all the perennial wisdom of the world's traditions. Uncleansed by soul service, our table service and all our other attempts to right wrongs make the world worse.

Leo Tolstoy wrote often on this theme. I had almost rather read you the entirety of one story, *The Godson*, than preach today. But time presses. The story tells of a young man sent on a quest to understand his own motivations, for in a moment of desire to do good swiftly, he had brought down a chain of awful crimes. His quest begins this way.

The godson entered [an inn], and taking his seat upon the brick oven he watched the woman scrubbing the room. Having done this, she began wiping the table with a dirty cloth. She wiped it from side to side—but it did not come clean. Then she wiped it the other way. The first streaks disappeared, but others came in their place. She wiped it from one end to the other, but again, the same thing. When one streak was wiped off, another was left on. The godson watched for awhile in silence, and then said: 'What are you doing, madam?' 'Don't you see I'm cleaning up for the holiday? Only I can't manage this table, it won't come clean. I'm quite tired out.' 'Rinse your cloth,' said the godson, 'before you wipe the table with it.'

Martha, Martha, rinse your cloth. Soul service before social service. When we do not rinse the cloth, spiritually speaking, we are what I call a functional atheist. We may identify with God's Christ and God's church socially, emotionally or aesthetically. But when opposition comes, if we go straightway to right the wrong, bringing with us all unawares our habits of thought and fear and need, we are functioning as atheists, as people for whom God is no good at the needed time. All Christians are sometimes functional atheists. For a lot of us churchgoers, functional atheism is the default setting. By contrast, plain atheism is so much healthier than functional atheism. Somewhere, the great Christian contemplative of the last century, Simone Weil, wrote: "As between a Christian with no experience of the supernatural and an atheist, the atheist is closer to the truth."

When are we functioning as atheists? When we learn of someone's bad opinion of us—and we set out to settle the score, then we are godless. When we drown our feelings of self-doubt in our addictions—drink or t.v. or Facebook or shopping; you name yours—we are functional atheists. When what we call our spiritual journey—Tom Bandy's observation—consists only of the roster of church committees we sat on through the years, planning and working, thinking and doing, pillars of the church who, like real pillars, have gone so stiff in the belief that everything above depends on us, then we are functioning as if God is not. If only you might hear within how the duty of your presence must give way for the beauty of your presence! When we blame politicians, and not ourselves, for the evils we deplore, we are godless.

Martha, Martha! We cannot fix anything, we cannot right any wrong when are importing our neediness and our old thoughts into each plan of action that swims into view. Somewhere Wendell Berry defines violence as taking the shortest route to an objective while ignoring the consequences. When our soul has not the habit of making space within where God Holy Spirit may come to give peace not like the world gives peace, and reveal a thought not like our thoughts, then we are violent, functional atheists. We need soul service to render social service rightly. It's a little like the priority that flight attendants insist on: If there's trouble in the air, do not try to help

others first; first get your own oxygen mask, then turn to others. It's the same with the gift of God's Spirit. Do not assume you can think well or serve well in extremity, but make sure your own soul has service.

So what was Mary doing in the living room with Jesus? Of course no one knows, but this much is sure. Jesus cannot have been talking all the while. Good teachers are eager for good learning; they know people don't learn much from much talking. So what was Jesus teaching? What did he want us to learn? New rules? That we must work the tables of a hungry society really hard? That the poor should receive lots of services? Not exactly. The gospel portraits are very clear in this matter. Jesus intends that his disciples learn the discipline of self-knowledge; of inward attention to the power of God to be present; to the beauty of your presence with the Lord. By God's power, this inner attention frees us up from ordinary habits of thought and feeling. It is the main work of prayer and meditation. Jesus was teaching Mary the practice of the presence God within—the beauty of her presence, not the duty of her presence to God. If he commanded disciples to love one another even as he loved them, but did not help them to see why they didn't and how they could grow, then he would be a lousy teacher. But we call him the good teacher. Be assured, he taught soul service before social service.

In the Sabbath day assembly of God's people, you cannot get all the soul service you need. We need much more practice in the presence of God than comes from listening to the preacher and the prayers and singing the songs. Our worship together falls under the rubric, Necessary but not sufficient. What is the evidence for this assertion? Isaiah has it from long ago: the nation's evils are all but untouched and unswayed by all the services and all the people offering sacrifices in God's name. The priority of soul service to social service is not only about our need for practice and prayer and meditation. It is also a strong diagnosis, for where God's mercy and God's justice and God's will is not done on earth as it is done in heaven, there God's people are by definition not God-connected, not soul servants. This is why the Lord says through Isaiah, *I hate your worship services. Your offerings are futile. I cannot endure solemn assemblies with such wickedness going on in the land.*

These words are almost too hard to bear. We could defend ourselves against them with the claim that God cannot feel that way about our worship service. But self-defense is not the way of the children of Abraham. It is not Jesus' way. Rather: *Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean!* Martha, Martha, rinse your cloth. Find your way to the Lord's feet, into the practices of attention to your streaked and muddied inner world, practices of prayer and meditation and fellowship that will render peace in this world, not just within

yourself but through all you do. At the very end of *The Undiscovered Self*, Carl Jung asks, *Do you know that you, the individual, are the make weight that tips the scales . . . that infinitesimal unit on whom the world depends, and in whom, if we read the Christian message aright, even God seeks God's goal?* Do you know who you are? Take up your cross. Lose your life for my sake, don't save it. Seek first the kingdom. Love your enemy. All these powers God will freely give to one who lets her soul service feed her social service. Then with our whole life we will be singing that last stanza of our first hymn of the day, "And so the yearning strong / With which the soul will long / Shall far outpass the power of human telling; For none can guess God's grace / Till Love creates a place / Wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling."

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