

Prayer And Work -- Pent+9C

“There are many paths to the feet of the One, but thither do we all travel.” From *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling 1901

Please folks. May I have your attention please? Attention please! I can deal with this trouble, friends, with a wave of my hand, this very hand! Please observe me if you will. I’m Professor Harold Hill, and I’m here to organize the River City Boys’ Band!

In his masterpiece *The Music Man*, Meredith Willson paints a wonderfully ironic and affectionate portrait of American small town life at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. In order to fleece them out of their hard-earned money, Harold Hill manages to get an entire town distracted by the fantastic dream of a marching band. All they have to do is believe every word he says, whether or not it makes any sense.

There is a happy ending: eventually Harold Hill’s scheme is revealed, he is rehabilitated, and even gets to marry Barbara Cook... or Shirley Jones . But the story hinges on our human tendency to get caught up in the conflicts and concerns that fleeting emotions produce; we are distracted by what means little (in the case of the boys’ band, it doesn’t exist!) and thus we are all too often unaware when true opportunity and lasting meaning present themselves.

In many ways, things are different today; yet in many ways they remain the same. Social observer and theorist Linda Stone describes the state we live in – with a constant and virtually unlimited stream of thoughts and imagery produced by others – as leading to “continuous partial attention.”

She writes: “When we multi-task, we are motivated by a desire to be more productive and more efficient. We’re often doing things that are automatic, that require very little cognitive processing. We give the same priority to much of what we do when we multi-task

—we get as many things done at one time as we possibly can in order to make more time for ourselves and in order to be more efficient and more productive.

But to pay continuous partial attention is to pay partial attention — continuously. It is motivated by a desire to be a “live node on the network.” Another way of saying this is that we want to connect and be connected. We want to effectively scan for opportunity and optimize for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, in any given moment. To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter.

And so we pay continuous partial attention in an effort not to miss anything. It is an always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that provokes an artificial sense of constant crisis. We are always on high alert. Notice what happens to your breath as you pull down and check your email or facebook page. Almost all of us hold our breath. Some of us tighten our upper body. If we’re aware of what we’re doing and we are able to manage our breath — that is, keep breathing — the stress response can be minimized.

Luke’s story of Martha and Mary affords us a picture of the First-Century version of this problem – two thousand years ago, people were faced with the challenge of prioritizing their focus, just as folks were when faced with slick salesmen in 1912, just as we are now when faced with the daunting possibility of knowing everything important all the time, or choosing to use our voting power to either react or respond to the challenges of modern life.

There are many places where Jesus’ intention, indeed his very words in a given story have been interpreted in disputable ways. This is nothing new – why else four canonical Gospels and others besides? The Mary and Martha story, which only appears in Luke is no exception. We have sometimes heard that Jesus is telling us holy contemplation is more valuable and important than simple labor, indeed, that one must choose between the two. The implication

that work and prayer are somehow opposite has been a common message. But it doesn't make much sense.

In truth, the Greek word we have translated as "better" is really more like "good." Jesus says that Mary, "... has chosen the good part," not because Martha has chosen the bad part, but because she has become so distracted by her worldly tasks that she is missing out on the whole of life. There's nothing bad about work – especially the work of hospitality! At any coffee hour, or our Wednesday movie nights, or any good party, there will be some of us who are cooking or talking to the cook, serving or spinning tales, cleaning up or cavorting at any given moment. If everyone were just worried about the work, there would be no party. Then again, if nobody worked, all we'd have is a big mess.

So it's not the fact of Martha's work that Jesus criticizes, it's the fact she lets worry about it keep her from living, living and listening. St. Francis is famously quoted as having said, "Preach the Gospel continuously, if necessary, use words." Perhaps we might paraphrase for Martha: 'Listen for the Gospel continuously, whether or not it comes in words.' Jesus is letting Martha know that her worries and distractions are making her unable to listen to the Gospel.

Stuart Bitkoff's poem, *A World at Prayer*: talks about the relative value of work:

I just saw a sign that read: 'A World at Prayer is a World at Peace.'

This sign displayed people from all over the world
Folding their hands, eyes closed in prayer.

Now this is a beautiful sentiment and all,
Folding one's hands and communicating with
Deity/Light.
But while everyone is busy praying,

Who is delivering pizza?
Or cutting my grass?
Or working in emergency rooms?

Seems to me prayer comes in many forms
Well directed actions are prayers too.

God knows the civilized World is at prayer this week, in global mourning for the seemingly continuous stream of horrendous acts perpetrated by a relatively few, viciously misguided people with evil in their hearts, who have caused so much pain and destruction for others. But God also knows that it will take more than prayer to isolate and neutralize these criminal forces. It will take the constant, concerted, cooperative efforts of all the prayerful and peaceful rest of us to do it, and we must acknowledge that the work will never be all finished this side of the River Jordan... or Styx.

Perhaps Martha is just better at some of the work than is Mary, that doesn't condemn Martha to anger and distraction about it. It is her contribution to the party, her gift. If she hates doing it, she should stop and listen to Jesus for awhile instead of grumbling about her sister. If she loves doing it, then she is already listening to the Gospel of loving vocation.

Certainly Harold Hill's beguiling salesmanship temporarily rendered the good citizens of River City, Iowa, (with the exception of Marian Paroo) entirely incapable of seeing the truth: that he was a phony. Certainly our technologically marvelous accomplishments have rendered us endlessly distractable from the relationships at our own feet, or outside our own front doors, and from the still, small voice of God in our hearts. Our wondrous electronic connectedness is the source of great pleasure; that is undisputable. But it can leave us a little breathless, a little reactionary, a little oblivious to true opportunity, a little less available and able to hear what's really going on in God's kingdom of love.