

The better part
Proper 11, Year C
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How are we going to save the planet? It seems like I read an article on this every week with new advice — almost like “follow this one wacky tip to melt your belly weight and stop climate change.” The answers feel more hollow all the time, as clickbait is wont to feel. Recycling, for instance, which is a good and commendable thing. Please do recycle. But what’s certain is that even a perfect recycling program, which does not exist, cannot keep up with just how much we consume. What’s never mentioned in these articles is that this increasing rate of consumption is what our entire economy is predicated upon, that constant growth, constant expansion is ‘good news’ — that finding a balance with nature would equal stagnation.

Don’t eat meat, they say. Good advice. Please do this. But meat and food in general is an abstract concept at best now — for the first time in human history, the average person has no first-hand interaction with food, and has no relationship to it beyond a monetary exchange at the supermarket. We think about meat, but forget that the sprawling monocultures to replace grazing pasture that give us our staples of corn, wheat, and rice, are unsustainable. They do not occur naturally, or without considerable chemical intervention. Again, finding a balance with nature would require becoming much smaller.

Don’t travel as much, particularly by air. Good advice and worth following. But we don’t to look at why, when overworked people are given their meager amount of time off, why they might want to get as far from their workplace as humanly possible.

Tom Hodgkinson would also like to save the planet and agrees that there’s something more substantial underneath these issues. He started something called the Idler, a magazine that grew into a movement devoted to helping people live more fulfilled lives. And here’s how: mostly, he thinks that in our driven and connected world, people have forgotten — and have been told that it is wrong — to slide into neutral and disconnect, to idle. In short, he would like to inspire you to do less with your life. At the Idler, you can learn the value of lying in bed (that’s where you get your best ideas), how to play the ukelele, the art and exercise of scything a patch of grass, and other such primitive and diverting exploits.

And when Tom Hodgkinson reads an article about how to save the planet, he says, this is what I’ve been on about! Do. Less. Work. A four-day work week, one extra day spent at home doing nothing, would massively curb emissions. Doing less, needing less, working less, attending to stillness, laying in your garden reading a book, will save the planet.

I think the story of Martha and Mary is incredibly apropos for this discussion. It was, in fact, pure coincidence that I scheduled the young adults of Calvary to go axe-throwing this week, the week before Ebet scheduled me to preach on, of all the scripture, *the* story of work and leisure in the New Testament.

Axe-throwing is about as primitive as you can get, using exactly zero technologically advanced devices. It's pure physical exertion that awakens some long-slumbering ancient Anglo-Saxon ancestor in my chest when I see my axe cleave cleanly into the lumber and lodge there. It's also totally useless, something that could be done in your backyard — so long as there was no one on the other side of your fence. And you're not particularly attached to your fence.

We always have a talk afterwards, and the topic was simple: what has your faith had to say about work or leisure? What have you been taught? We had everything to say about work: the Puritanical work ethic, Paul's instruction that those who do not work will not be fed, to that line that gets passed around like Scripture even in an irreligious family like mine, "God helps those who help themselves." What a shock for me to find it nowhere in the Bible, but that this phrase is the antithesis of everything I learned about God in Scripture; God helps the utterly helpless, the ones who have no idea they even need help. (That's a different sermon.)

But for leisure, we had only one comment. One person said, "There's this talk of Sabbath in the Bible but I don't think I've ever known anyone to take it seriously." Now, I haven't been in this church business too long, but I've never met a Christian who thought of themselves as Mary in this story from our Gospel. In fact, any time I meet someone with a strong opinion about this text, they say it's terribly unfair how Jesus downplays the meritorious Martha and lifts up someone who is just sitting there, like Mary. "How does he expect to eat if no one is preparing the food?" And you know, it's almost always women who react viscerally to this, as though we have been ingrained with the idea that someone is always needing taken care of, and that the weight of others' needs is squarely on our shoulders. (Also a sermon for another time.)

Jesus is unambiguous, which is super out-of-character for Jesus. He says, Martha, you're not present. You've got so many things to do, so many would've/should've/could'ves running around your head, so many likes waiting to be checked on Instagram, so much to keep up with. These things are a lie. Mary is learning to be. She is doing less. And this will save her and the world.

Richard Rohr writes about this event as the difference between the way of knowledge and the way of wisdom. In the past 500 years, he argues, Christianity has evolved into a pursuit of knowledge, learning the right information rather than learning *who to be*. He says, "Knowledge is the gathering of information, of 'the ten thousand things,' as the Buddhists poetically call it ... Wisdom is a different way of seeing and knowing these ten thousand things. Wisdom is precisely the freedom to be present... In Jesus' time religiously observant people were storing up treasures for the next world, while Jesus was just living and talking about what was right in front of him — birds, lilies, tenants, and suffering."

I think Richard Rohr, Jesus, Mary, and Tom Hodgkinson are saying the same thing. To find fulfillment, our striving and effort can actually take us away from the true path.

I'll tell you a story. Melissa and I visited the Holy Land three years ago. In Jerusalem, every Friday at sundown, the fireworks start: the approaching queen, Shabbat, the Sabbath, is welcomed. Every restaurant closes, there are no grocery stores, no trains, the taxis and traffic disappear, the place grounds to a halt. On that Friday evening, we sat alone on the hotel balcony, eating some cold cream cheese sandwiches left out by the staff, and listened to the people singing inside.

Whole streets were blocked off with rickety barricades, cars replaced by hordes of little Orthodox children who ran and scootered and kickballed all around their newly reclaimed asphalt playground. The grownups sat in groups, looking on with wine and laughter. No phones, no laptops, no distancing technology allowed on this day. Folks hurried off to synagogue in these shiny robes and hairy hats that

put our fanciest chasuble right to shame. We visited the Western Wall that day, the Wailing Wall, and looked on, listened from the beyond the border to the singing, the singing and the crying.

Like Martha, I watched it all from the outside. Inwardly, when I dug past the layers of my conditioning — the shameful layer of my capitalistic annoyance at my personal inconvenience, the layer of wide-eyed awe at the exotic, down past my American layer of concern about the division of church and state...

At my heart, I felt something like hunger, an ache; that truly, they had chosen the better part, and it would not be taken from them.