

Deepening Relationships: Have You Centered Your *Wa* Today?

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The Gospel passage that we read from Luke this morning is, well, a bit tricky. Not in the literal sense. It is a simple, four-verse vignette that features three characters - Jesus, and two women, Mary and Martha – a brief episode during Christ’s journey to Jerusalem. Yet, the passage is rich in interpretive possibilities, meaning and nuance. Indeed, the interpretive history of this story from Luke has gone through two principal phases over time. The traditional interpretation focuses on Mary’s choice to sit and listen to Jesus – the “better part” or better choice – and Christ’s admonishment of Martha for being distracted from the one thing truly needed. So, if we were to consider this passage using a more traditional interpretation, this sermon could be titled, say, “Getting Your Spiritual House in Order,” or could be an exegesis about the one thing or few things that we really need. For example, in the 14th century, Meister Eckhart – a famous German theologian and mystic - wrote about this passage that the one thing truly important was “sanctification,” a good Reformed concept about growing in faith through coming ever nearer to God.

But, for our modern ears, this little story may be somewhat off-putting. Worrying that traditional interpretations are too patriarchal or condescending, modern commentaries instead have focused on Martha’s role in the narrative. In fact, more modern interpretations uplift Martha’s work as practicing hospitality and service – two virtues quite important in the ancient world. Thus, Martha’s part in the story is not so easily dismissed as, say, “women’s work” or mere distraction; far from it.

Today, I’d like for us to consider the meaning of both Mary and Martha’s roles in this passage for understanding the things that may truly center our lives and deepen our relationships with God and each other.

Centering Your *Wa*: Unity, Harmony, and Oneness

At the start of each of my college classes, I begin with some general questions to the students about how things are going, what's the latest news, what sporting and other events are on the docket, and so on. I then usually move to the lectern and say something like, "Ok, let's center our *Wa*, align our *Om* with our *Cri*, take a deep breath and begin, shall we." Now, this strikes the fancy of some of the students, others smile or even titter a bit, and still others will look at me as if I've flipped my wig. But there is method to the madness: the purpose here is to focus the student's and my attention on the matter at hand. It is, in essence, saying: Let's come together and rock and roll.

The concept of *Wa* is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, and derives from religious ideas and practices found in Shinto and Buddhism. The term is usually translated into English as "harmony," so that the centering of one's *Wa* presupposes seeking a peaceful unity within the self and with the world around you. This concept has obvious affinities with what we know as Yin and Yang in Taoism, the interconnectedness of earthly and heavenly, male and female, and light and dark forces of universal life. Understandings about and imperatives for unity and harmony - the "one thing" - are, in fact, found in virtually all major cultures and religions. For example, the concepts of unity and collective harmony have deep roots in Hindu philosophies and religious praxis. The same is true for Islam: the Koran speaks often of one God, one Book, one global community, one brotherhood and the unity of human identity. The basic idea found in these spiritual and moral praxes is that unity, harmony, and oneness are – and should be - the center of individual and collective life, a principle rooted in beliefs about creation, the nature of the human self, and the possibility of some final resolution to a "beloved community," to use Martin Luther King's terminology. What I am *not* talking about are notions found in self-help psychology books like "What Color is Your Parachute," or "The Seven Habits of Successful People," or other works about getting your priorities and daily practices in sync. Important as these things are, what we are considering here is something much deeper and wider: that is, the oneness of all life and the one thing that may center each and every life.

Oneness and the One Thing in Christian Life

So, where do ideas about unity, harmony and oneness in Christian life come from? These first come from our theological understandings about God and creation. We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. Our God creates all things, sustains all things, and redeems all things. This is a metaphysical claim about the essence of creation. Second, we believe that all humans are created in the image of God – the *imago Dei* – a metaphysical claim about the essence of humanity, and yet another source of our understanding about unity and oneness. We humans image God in our hearts and minds; we think, we reason, we laugh and cry, we love just as God made us to do, no matter the color of our skin, our ancestry, our nation, our talents and weaknesses. Though hard to imagine the rich, even boundless diversity of humankind, yet we are one in the image of God. And finally, unity and oneness are made manifest in our Lord Jesus Christ. Hear these words from our New Testament reading this morning:

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first born from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 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.

Beginning, middle and end: all woven together in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thus, our most important understandings about the oneness of life come from our beliefs about the meaning and promise of Christ's life, death and resurrection: redemption, reconciliation, and atonement – at-one-ment. Becoming one with God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ: This is the *Wa*, the centering truth of Christian life. "I am the salt of the earth." "I am the way, the truth, the life." "I am the light of the world." Beginning, middle, and end.

Back to the Beginning

Centering our lives, living in harmony, creating unity from diversity, being one with God: all these practices may be thought of as paths on one journey of Christian life – the journey of discipleship: to be in this world but not of this world. A paradox, for sure, but one that we may recognize in the story of Martha and Mary that we read today in Luke's gospel. Sometimes – not always, but sometimes – by chopping up the Scriptures into bite-size lectionary pieces for

worship and reflection, we do ourselves a disservice. I think this is the case for today's passage. Let me explain.

The scripture immediately preceding today's Gospel reading is the parable of the Good Samaritan. In it, we learn the meaning of neighborly love in action; that is, how we take the ideal of neighborly love and make it real. And this, my friends, is the role Martha plays in our passage today. By providing service, hospitality, and neighborly love to strangers, Martha is exemplifying what it means to be in this world as a disciple of Christ.

The scripture immediately following today's Gospel passage tells of the Christ teaching his disciples to pray what we have come to call "The Lord's Prayer." Growing our faith and living into spiritual oneness with God through listening, prayer, devotion, and reflection – this is the part Mary plays in our story, the "being not of this world" part. The "better part?" I don't know; sometimes yes and maybe sometimes no, as in the case of the Good Samaritan. But here's what I think I do know: both Martha and Mary are playing two parts – the Yin and the Yang - of the same drama, the same journey of discipleship to oneness in, with and through Jesus Christ.

This, I believe, is the true meaning of atonement: in his life, death and resurrection, Christ restored the unity of all creation, composed a harmony of life together out of the discord of sin, and offered us the promise of oneness with God the Father. Living into this unity begins here, in this church, in this community of believers. When we share the peace with each other, we are pledging our desire for harmony with one another in the belief that "all things hold together" in Jesus Christ. By seeking peace and harmony with our Hindu or Buddhist or Islamic brothers and sisters, we acknowledge with them that all creation is unified under God. This unity is the springboard from which we may dive into the deep end of relationship with God and community.

Chiseled in stone by his statue in Washington, D.C., are these profound words written by Martin Luther King, Jr.:

In a real sense all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.

King's understanding of the interrelatedness of all life surely reflects his belief in the unity of creation, a unity held together by the one true God in Jesus Christ. For him, this understanding served as a premise for the possibility of the "beloved community," the unified, harmonious Kingdom of God on earth to which he dedicated his life's work. So, how do we get there?

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity may one day be restored. And they'll know we are Christians by our love.

That's how we get there: By our love.

Amen.