

“Restoring Margin to Overloaded Lives” Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner

It seems to me that today’s scripture, the familiar story of Mary and Martha, is really talking about the wider subject of Sabbath. Remember in the Creation Story, where God took the seventh day to rest from all that had been done? In that Genesis scripture, God institutes Sabbath, or Rest, as one of the most important themes in the Judeo-Christian story! And later in the Hebrew Scripture’s story, sabbath is treated with primacy again when it is given as the fourth of ten commandments. God seems to take very seriously the rhythms of work and rest by which we are to live.

Then, in our Gospel story for today, we hear the familiar story of Mary and Martha. And while everything in us would have expected Jesus to stick up for Martha, that busy little beaver who is,, after all, serving others and working industriously, he goes and surprises us again by saying that MARY is the one who has chosen the better portion. Mary who forsook all that fast paced “doing” in order to just “be”; to quiet herself and her mind, and sit at Jesus’ feet where she could reconnect with God and therein renew her spirit.

It’s a challenge to find any sense of sabbath in the times we live in. Even if you are retired, many of you are busier than ever with volunteering, church, family commitments, etc. And even if you have ample actual time, you may have a very busy MIND, a mind that is constantly running from pillar to post and working hard in its own way. So whatever your current life situation, I trust that we all have our “inner Martha” in one way or another. And to address that, I’d like to tell you about one of the most important books I have ever read, because it really helps to explain the unique time in history in which we are living, and the reason we have so lost any sense of Sabbath in our lives. The book is entitled “Restoring Margin to Overloaded Lives” by Dr. Richard Swenson, who is both a busy physician and a futurist.

-Margin, as Swenson uses the term, is the space between our load and our limits. It's that little bit of breathing room or open space in life where regeneration happens, where serenity is restored. For Christians, it is the central Biblical concept based, as I mentioned, on the commandment of Sabbath, and also based on the OT concept of Jubilee, where the people were instructed to allow the fields to lie fallow every 7th year so that even the earth could regenerate.

Sabbath, it should be said, was not created for God's benefit, but for ours. Its not about God making us go to church to stroke the Divine ego with worship; its about helping us take time to sink our roots down from the tree to that life giving stream underground, because God knows that's how we are happiest and most whole. God knows that if we do without some version of margin and Sabbath for too long, we pay a price in all kinds of ways. We become disconnected from our best selves, and from each other. And the problem is intensified in this day and age, because we have lost margin not just on an individual, interpersonal level, and not just in a gradual way. We have lost it collectively and culturally in a way that is unique to our particular time in history, and in a way that is far more serious and extreme than just that "we have become too busy."

For virtually all of history up until the last quarter of the 20th Century, Swenson points out that change happened gradually and could be charted like this...

Show Linear Growth (hand gesture)

Beginning sometime in the 1970's, the rate of change went from gradual to exponential, which means it took a sudden turn from this to this. On a chart, it would be called a J Curve.

Swenson measures this change on a couple of dozen scales. He measured the rate of change in areas such as the population of the world and of the United States, our gross national product, our gross federal debt, our volume of snail mail and junk mail, let alone e-mail, air miles

traveled, new books published, motor vehicle travel, health care information, personal technologies we must learn, etc...In the end, he lumps them all together under three basic categories, and he charts the increase in the past thirty or so years, of 1. complexity, 2. information and 3. change. Finally, he concludes that in all three general categories, we have gone from gradual to exponential rates of change.

The problem is that people are incapable of thinking in exponential terms, and consistently, dramatically UNDERESTIMATE the way these changes have affected the entire milieu in which we live.

To illustrate how rapidly exponential numbers accumulate and why they are so hard for us to envision, long range forecaster J. Scott Armstrong gave a graduate class of 20 business students the following puzzle: If you folded a piece of paper in half 40 times, how thick would the result be?

13 students said less than one foot

5 students said said between one foot and one mile

2 students said between one and 2000 miles

none said greater than 2000 miles

THE CORRECT ANSWER IS THAT THE PAPER WOULD BE THICK ENOUGH TO REACH TO THE MOON AND BACK

Another example: If you were to exponentially increase your intake of ice cream every year, beginning with one teaspoon on your first birthday, two teaspoons on your second birthday, four teaspoons on your third birthday, 16 teaspoons by your fourth birthday, etc. **BY AGE FIFTY, YOU WOULD BE EATING FIFTY TWO TONS OF ICE CREAM.** I know this sounds

impossible, but I had my nephew, who is a statistician, check these out, and he says both examples are just about right.

But here's the thing, because there is little in our day to day lives that changes exponentially, we tend to think and plan with the old, gradual change mind-set. Meanwhile, largely unnoticed by us, history has shifted into fast-forward. If linear still best describes our personal lives, exponential now best describes our cultural change. The significance of this is incalculable, yet the typical American, unused to thinking in exponential terms, consistently underestimates it.

The astounding acceleration of change and the increasing complexity of life over the past 30 years, have time-warped us into a new era. Swenson says "We live in an unprecedented day. We have been disarticulated from our own past and do not yet know how to deal with this new present. Having been selected to live out this great drama, we are playing a different game by different rules on a different stage than any other people in the history of the world."

And yet, in many ways, our daily lives still look basically the same, the sun rises every morning, we go through our daily routine, the sun sets etc. So have things really changed? Swenson says to think of a raft floating along in a lazy stream, then a faster stream, then a river, then a mile-wide raging river. We keep saying, "but my raft is the same". Similarly, our individual lives float in a culture. Our lives continue to be the same 24 hour days wherein we work, eat, sleep, play. All the while the cultural flow becomes faster and rougher. Taking refuge in the boundaries of our raft, we pretend that because the dimensions of our raft have not changed, nothing else has really changed either. Until we plummet over the falls.

I want to be very clear here that none of this is to say that progress is bad, nor to encourage naïve nostalgia over the past. I personally have no interest in going back to a time before antibiotics, electricity or even computers. The truth is,

We have problems and our ancestors had problems

Our problems are painful, and our ancestors problems were painful

We have some advantages in our lifestyle, and our ancestors had some advantages in their lifestyles.

One thing I LIKE about this book is that it does not bash progress as a whole, nor advocate a naïve return to a perfect past that never really existed. All it says is that given where we have come, we do have some unique challenges (not better or worse, just different)

Our problems come from the fact that there are only so many, Martha-like details that can be comfortably or reasonably managed in any one life. Yet we have to deal with more “things per person” (in fact, exponentially more) than at any other time in history. Every year we have to deal with: more information, more technology, more change, more products, more choices, more commitments, more work, more debt, need for more education just to keep up, more expectations, more fatigue, more hurry, more media, more noise, more possessions, in short, more of everything. And yet, once the number of details that any one person can reasonably deal with has been exceeded, a very painful malady begins to set in. Dr. Swenson calls it OVERLOAD, and lists its symptoms as

Forgetfulness (“the disk is full”)

Depression

Anxiety

The Desire to Withdraw and become unavailable (phone phobia)

Feeling that things are on the verge of slipping out of control

Difficulty making decisions

Mental or action paralysis

Impatience and irritability

Lack of civility

Feeling overwhelmed at or unwilling to learn new technology

We need to learn that we have God-Given limits, which are not all the same. Some people need more margin than others and that is NOT a matter of weakness, but of God-given temperament. But we need to learn our limits and to honor them. We need to take seriously the commandment of Sabbath, and begin to restore some healthy margin to each day, to put down our Martha busyness and, like Mary, just sit with the Spirit.

Swenson says we should learn our outer limits and then seek to live at about the 80% place. At 80% of our own maximum, we still have enthusiasm for new commitments, energy, creativity, gratitude, contentment. Involvements are energizing rather than burdensome. At 100% of our own max: we begin to experience ambivalence about our involvements, we begin to have feelings of self and time protection, discomfort with plans, fatigue, dispiritedness, irritability. At 115 % of our own max: we have the previous list of symptoms of overload., but intensified. This is the state of being where an automated phone system or walking into an overly stimulating “Best Buy” or trying to understand your cell phone bill, can send you right over the edge. This is where things like Road Rage happen.

We need to live at closer to the 80% place of our own limits, and to protect that 20 % of margin fiercely. Some of you may remember that in the olden days of the fifties and early sixties

anyway, many small town stores closed on Wednesday afternoons. The idea was that those business people were working on Saturday, so they took Wednesday afternoon as a bit of margin. Everybody in town knew it, and planned around it. It was really a very gracious and civilized practice!

We need to restore some sense of margin and Sabbath...for ourselves and our families so that we can be more responsive to the still, small voice of the spirit. There is nothing magical about Sunday, per se, and maybe its not one, whole, separate day. Maybe its an hour, or a half our each day, of spiritual reading or meditating or maybe even just sitting on the porch, by yourself, with a glass of iced tea.

Summer is a good time to try getting in touch with your inner "Mary". So this summer, let me challenge you to take time to let your roots sink all the way down to that life giving stream. To remember that the Good Shephard still wants to lead the beloved beside still waters where they can find restoration for the disjointed, exponentially overloaded soul. This summer, find your inner Mary, and remember that Our Lord has said that Mary chose the better portion.