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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)  
July 17, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

A former bishop of mine from years ago was fond of a portion of this morning's Second Reading; to be exact, it was the second half of verse 17 from the first chapter of Colossians: "In [Christ] all things hold together." What led him over and over again back to this verse was likely the testimonies from people he served who were convinced that the church was falling apart. It was, perhaps, a way for a bishop to say, "Christ is the head of this organization, not me or any other human being."

I must point out, however, that this bishop was, in many ways, an exceptional leader himself, so he wasn't handing off a whole bunch of responsibility to The Big Guy in the Sky. Rather, he acknowledged everyone's role -- including his own -- in the life of the church, but remembering and celebrating, above all, the One who "holds everything together." That's a subtle but important distinction. We have responsibilities yet we have limitations. We do God's work but we are not gods ourselves. We encourage unity but realize that only Christ is the source of our unity.

Remember, too, that it takes faith to say, "In Christ, all things hold together." Over and over again in my two decades of ministry I've seen very sincere and committed people who worked extremely hard in their churches, but they did it with an anxiety that seemed to ease Christ out of the picture. It would appear to me that, if Christ is "before all things" (Colossians 1:17a), there would be no question as to whose work is being done and who is doing it. And

when we are so convinced, down to the core of our being, that Christ "holds all things together," we are living the faith into which we were called and enduring through the challenges of being the church in the twenty-first century...without the anxiety that would otherwise weigh down our hearts and minds.

Speaking personally, I tend not to function very well in high-anxiety settings, especially if I sense that I'm expected to "do something" in the situation. (I'm better, though, if I have some detachment from what's going on.) This is why, for example, churches and other organizations often have a third party who has that detachment come in to be a "non-anxious" presence" when times get tough. And please know that this approach and lingo is nothing new, but rather goes back decades to the extensive work of Edwin Friedman in the field of Family Systems Theory.

Where I might depart from Family Systems Theory would be in terms of our faith's role in keeping our churches healthy. Although Family Systems Theory was pioneered by a rabbi, it remains a fairly secular discipline. Faith, however, has a tremendous role in lifting the burden of anxiety from our community. Again, our Second Reading from Colossians contains some timely insights to that effect; we are going to be "holy" and "blameless" and "irreproachable" and -- might I add -- "non-anxious" as long as we "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (Colossians 1:23a). In any Christian community, the good news of the Gospel -- and the Christ contained in that Gospel -- are sufficient to sustain the community because they, with the spark of the Holy Spirit, will sustain us

in the faith. As long as these things are working together, the Church will hold together!

Turning to this morning's Gospel text, I suppose one could say Martha was the one anxiously trying to keep everything together, while Mary was the one with true faith. I direct your attention to Martha's plea: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me" (Luke 10:40b). Would it be safe to say that fairness and justice are at stake here? Why should one person sit idly by while another does all the work?

Most of the time, the Marthas of the world find Jesus' response to be very unsatisfying, if not downright insulting. Jesus says, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part..." (Luke 10:41-42a). The implicit lesson here is that it is better to listen to one's Lord than it is to busy oneself with duties that may not necessarily be so important. But I've wondered...if the world were all Marys and no Marthas, would anything ever get done? I'm imagining at the moment overgrown lawns, overflowing garbage cans, and sinks full of dirty dishes. Maybe we could add countless partially finished projects like half-paved roads and half-built houses into this picture, too. Planes, trains, and buses would arrive at their destinations when they reached them -- sometimes.

This doesn't sound like the sort of world many people would want to live in, does it?

But on the brighter side, there wouldn't be any war, there wouldn't be any

greed, and there probably wouldn't be much competition, so if a more serene, laid-back life is your thing, then it's Mary all the way! If you want things to happen and get done on time, then, I suppose, you're better off with Martha.

But why does Jesus seemingly force us to choose between one and the other? I'm going to attempt to interpret Jesus as charitably as possible (because he is our Lord and Savior after all), and I'd have to say that, were we to approach his admonition to Martha less defensively, it would become clear that Jesus wasn't demanding so much fuss over his visit, and all that needs to get done will get done in due time, albeit not immediately. Now that's a way of lowering the anxiety in a situation, I think! Modern workplaces, as another example, are sometimes filled with people doing things that aren't really necessary simply to prevent themselves from being idle. We can thank the Industrial Revolution for bringing us highly specialized jobs and overly specific job descriptions for this phenomenon. Thinking about doing something or laying out a bunch of unnecessary groundwork for something are other ways people can feel like they're busy without actually accomplishing anything. In those moments, it might actually be better to be a Mary and listen.

And a Martha taken to an extreme would be a person who is constantly busy for the sake of being busy. Why would a person behave this way? Is it for some kind of recognition? Is it to avoid going berserk? Is it to keep away from spouse or family? If the answer is "yes" to any or all of these questions, then we have a problem. And surely, sometimes it might be better to heed Jesus' advice to Martha and do nothing...except listen.

Through the years, I've encountered a number of people with previous military service, several of whom were seminary classmates of mine, and these classmates, often with twenty-plus years of service, had considerable leadership experience, as well. One thing I've learned over time from persons who've served in the military is their approach to getting others to do what needs to be done. First, they identify the task. Second, they show you how to complete the task (if necessary). Third, they tell you to go do the task. Beyond that, the rest is left up to you. No hand-holding. No micromanaging. The ranking officer (if it's not you) is not going to live your life for you. In more than one instance, I've asked the appropriate person, "Is that a military thing?" The best answer I've received so far is, "No, it's a leadership thing."

With Christ as our Leader, all things will, indeed, hold together, because Christ has identified us, showed us what to do, and commissioned us to do it. And thankfully, the "holding together" part isn't our job completely, because where Christ is, the church will be. Where our responsibility begins is in the Mary-like listening for Christ's call both inside and outside the walls of this church. The Martha-like doing is neither our work alone nor work for the sake of being busy; it is instead the Holy Spirit moving us to complete the tasks to which Christ has called us. So Martha doesn't disappear; we just need to listen like Mary before we do anything.

If we don't listen, we could end up doing something unnecessary, damaging, or both.

The best of the good news here, though, is in that favorite verse of my former bishop -- "In [Christ] all things hold together." Left to our own devices

without Christ, the church would surely collapse. But with a living faith in Christ, the church will endure. With this faith, the needs of people are clearer than the wants of personalities, and the redemptive power of Christ overcomes the destructive power of mortals. In Christ, we are saved from all the sin, despair, and self-hatred that would otherwise tear the church apart completely. Knowing that, we have no other choice than to let Christ hold us together.

Amen.