

**Sermon Preached by Mr. Geoffrey Royce
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 21, 2019 – Proper 11, Year C**

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in Christ all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible... Col 1:15

I had the great privilege of teaching both of my daughters to drive. They learned to drive in my pick-up truck with a manual transmission. They clearly were very brave young women. The difficulty they were facing was not lost on me. I had remembered what it was like for me when I learned to drive. I very much wanted their experience to be different from mine.

So, for much of their early formation I decided on using a more hands-off approach. We would find an empty parking lot and I would get out of the truck, open my camp chair and allow my daughter to be alone in the truck as she practiced learning to use the clutch. I think this was probably illegal, but nothing bad came of it.

Of course, we both knew that I could hear and see everything but there was sufficient distance between us that my smile and my thumbs up were primarily what registered. Generally, she could remain undistracted and focus on what she was trying to learn.

Today's gospel tells us about the perplexity of the relationship between two sisters and their encounter with Christ. One focused on an immediate task, the other on eternity. One focused on anxious concerns, the other on abandoning herself to the very source of life.

How do you identify yourself in this story? I think we all may have a bit of both sisters in us. Martha carries that restive part of our nature – that part that becomes impatient, dissatisfied, or bored...restless, uneasy.

Perhaps Martha believes that the task at hand is greater than her ability, her endurance, her love. So, she seeks a human solution, more human power. But she does this indirectly asking Jesus, Lord of all to arrange things differently to suit her needs.

While many hands usually make for a lighter burden, we could wonder a bit about what is at stake here for Martha. Does she feel put upon, neglected, unworthy, unnoticed even burnt out. Don't we all need to feel recognition, appreciation, and support for our efforts? They matter very much for the work we do here together.

She asks for something from Jesus whom many have witnessed making things right, better and whole. Jesus, speaking for Mary, points out that Mary was already on the right track. This seems unequivocal. All the possible options are exposed here. So how do we hear this as followers of Christ.

Why aren't good works enough? Why can't we just substitute good works for an untrammelled, unencumbered devotion to loving and listening to God in Christ.

There is a difference between devotion and commitment. Devotion is about personal presence, personal cost and commitment is about completing something, seeing something through to the end. Both are important.

I think it is simply the case that all good works like the ones contained in Matthew 25 (clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison, welcoming the stranger) are all necessary because of some human inequity. Some human silence, indifference or vanity.

Whether they are part of the problem or the solution to the problem, the works are all temporary, as the author of the letter of James would say, "like a mist" as is the inequity that made them necessary.

Because God is gracious, we can begin the process of purifying our souls by engaging in good works. We begin to act out of a love for the other that seeks nothing in return. Gratuitous self-giving. But the goal of the good works is not the works themselves or even the positive outcome. It is the unseen aspects that are part of God's project, our salvation.

Rippling out from the relation established in agapic love or caritas, is the actual outcome that matters. When we turn to these works in essence we become part of a corporate confession to the inequities that made them necessary.

Luke is preaching to a prosperous community, one in which he hopes to inspire hospitality and a compassionate approach to community life. Perhaps we may also become poised to challenge the conditions that have made Martha's work necessary.

Mary and those who choose Mary's path are already making that challenge by focusing all their power and strength in this present world on the love of Jesus. Love is a verb. Of all possible actions love is the only one that survives death/ Love is the source and motive of all enduring human acts. Love keeps us, feeds us and changes us.

I guess expectation is the crux of this story isn't it? Expectation and its connection to anxiety. It's not easy to allow others their freedom sometimes. Because there can be only one who has all freedom, with whom all things are possible, we perforce share limited freedom and as a consequence we are endowed with limited gifts.

It took a second try for my older daughter to pass her driving test and get her driver's license. The younger did it on her first try. Once they had gotten their license, they faced their next big challenge because we were living in New England at that point. They had to begin to learn how to find their way on the meandering cow paths that rural New Englanders call their secondary road system. Then there were the winters to deal with. But because of all these obstacles I knew my daughters could drive almost anything, anywhere.

If you ever happen to get lost in rural Maine and stop to ask directions, someone may respond to your question by saying, “You can’t get theya from heya.” What this means in New England is that there is no direct way to get there or even more likely, “the place you are trying to find is very remote and it is difficult to describe the route to someone so unfamiliar with the area.

In the last several weeks during my volunteer shift at East End Cooperative Ministries I have been almost exclusively engaged with unloading goods from pallets that are parked near the pantry and stocking the shelves of the pantry. Not a hard job for me. I work in a supermarket. This actually qualifies as a ministry as long as you see ministry as doing what is right in front of you because it is necessary.