

## **Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room**

Psalm 16      Luke 10:38-42

SF Swedenborgian Church      July 18, 2010

Rev. Kathy Speas

Make sure your cell phones and Blackberries and all your I-gadgets are off, because it will be especially humiliating today to have all your electronics pipe up as we contemplate this classic tale of contrast between doing-doing-doing in the world, and just being, resting in the Presence of God.

You all must have figured this out to some extent – you're here, not home, or at the office, or on the electronic leash, doing what needs to be done. Good for you! You're here, and not working. You don't need a sermon about slowing down!

This is not news – that Mary gained more by sitting at Jesus feet and listening than Martha did fussing around the kitchen with the chores. Anyone NOT seen a magazine or website or TV show or book urging us to slow down, take “Me-Time,” “Down Time” simplify, stop and smell the roses? Anybody NOT talked with friends about being overloaded, workaholism, the guilt and envy that ensues from feeling non-productive in a go-getter world? In one recent article, a working single mother with six kids said she had plenty of me-time – whenever she needed me-time, quiet time, she scheduled dental work. Not clear on the Martha-Mary thing, I think. This is not news.

It is HARD, REALLY HARD, to sit down, sit at Jesus' feet, and just listen. Mary didn't figure out a new system of being in X steps, she didn't get enlightened, change her consciousness, have an “aha” moment, gain new insights, she didn't achieve any next level, conquer her faults, repent, restore, regenerate, renew her love life, clear out her karma, she didn't strive for anything. She simply sat there. At Jesus' feet. Listening. So simple -- but very difficult.

A lot has been written in Western tradition about what an arduous task it is to, as Stephen Mitchell put it, “come to the center of the universe and rest in perfect love.” The early desert fathers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries noticed how hard it was to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen. They wrote of “the noonday demon,” the tendency to become distracted in mid-day from devotion that began at 3 or 4 am. This spiritual state of not being able to sit, rest, open to God was called “Acedia,” literally “not-caring.” One monk wrote of how he felt in his efforts to rest in God’s presence -- “tedium or perturbation of heart, boredom with one’s cell, scorn and contempt for one’s brethren, a feeling of inertness.” The desert monks suggested manual labor (especially basket weaving) as the antidote to this spiritual lethargy. No wonder Martha was so concerned with the kitchen chores!

This state of Acedia eventually became the Deadly Sin of Sloth. And then our whole work-ethic society evolved and conspired to identify sitting, opening, listening as lazy. The 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers weighed in on our conflict between spiritual stillness and motion. Pascal writes, “Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he feels his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependency, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up **from the depths of his soul** boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.” Kant wrote of a “dread of the void” Schopenhauer speaks of the anguish of “Longing without an object.” The contemporary spiritual writer Kathleen Norris sees our hyper-paced, overstimulated world as a reaction to the immense difficulty of sitting still at the foot of God. She describes the non-stop adrenaline-fueled hamster wheel energy that characterizes 21<sup>st</sup> century life as “Spiritual morphine,” something that numbs us to the pain of separation from the Divine.

This simple sitting, stopping, opening, waiting, receiving is the foundation of Buddhist practice. And they spend a lifetime practicing this, in three year-three-month-three-day silent retreats. Then they have to get reincarnated, because it takes MORE than a couple of lifetimes to get even halfway decent at sitting and listening.

So, you see, this is bigger than just a suggestion to get more “Me Time.” We do seem to be hard-wired to keep busy and get something accomplished.

Swedenborg writes a lot about the dynamic relationship between our inner and outer natures, in a variety of contexts. He writes of “inner worship,” how we prepare our souls to receive life and faith from God, vs “outer worship,” the rituals and liturgy we engage in to express our relationship with God. “What is good and true in the genuine sense are found in the more inward plane or more inward conscience, for good and truth flowing in from the Lord are what activate this conscience. By the more interior plane... the Lord governs those who are made new.” On the importance of this inner life, Swedenborg writes, “It is generally recognized that what is outside us cannot control what is inside us, but what is inside can control what is outside.” He also writes, “Details of faith, drawn from the Word of the Lord, have to be planted in the mind of a spiritual person so that the intellectual aspect of the mind receives instruction. But as long as the mind is overflowing with false ideas, true ideas of faith cannot take root even though they have been planted there.” Indeed, this is a church that focuses on the inner life, attention to what touches our hearts, what flows through our minds, and how we make choices in the world, not a church that is heavily tied to ritual and a long tradition of liturgy and sacraments.

Well, it would be a lot easier if someone would just tell us what prayers to pray, what rituals to engage in, or even if those “10 Ways to Simplify your Life” articles really did work. It is a lot easier to memorize all the rosary prayers, the Hail Marys and Our

Fathers and Glory Bes and Fatima Prayers and all five of each of the Four Mysteries -- the Joyful ones on Mondays and Saturdays, the Luminous ones on Thursdays, the Sorrowful ones on Tuesdays and Fridays, and Wednesdays and Sundays are the Glorious ones, unless its Lent or Holy Week or Advent when there is a different routine. Complicated, but easy.

But that's what I love about this church. The invitation to prepare our inner selves to meet God. The call to clear that ground, pull those weeds, get that junk out of the corners, open our hearts and minds and hands and wait for God to move through us. The acknowledgement that this process, and the way God is made visible through each of us, will be different for each of us, and will recur over and over again throughout our lives and into eternity.

Swedenborg waxes eloquent about the importance of preparing our inner life to receive, but doesn't give us much in the way of how-tos. And don't think I'm about to give you a handy-dandy list of EZ ways to prepare your inner life to receive the divine flowing through. Besides, you know how this works – nature, prayer time, yoga, long walks, journaling, time with the people you love the most, forget the people – time with the dogs and cats, music, art – let's be honest, we all know that church and Bible reading are not the only, or even always the most powerful, ways we re-connect with God. There are many, many ways to prepare the ground for Divine seeds. As the 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet Rumi says, "There are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

So this important spiritual task of making our inner selves ready to receive is different for each of us, and it changes at different states throughout our lives. But I believe it starts not with church or the Bible or nature or yoga or what have you, but with silence. We are led to those things that will shape us and guide us and nourish us from a still, open place of silence, and waiting. Like Mary.

I'd like to close with a poem from a 20<sup>th</sup> century Norwegian poet, Rolf Jacobsen

**The Silence Afterwards** (Rolf Jacobsen, Norwegian poet, 1907-1994)

Try to be done now  
with deliberately provocative actions and sales statistics,  
brunches and gas ovens,  
be done with fashion shows and horoscopes,  
military parades, architectural contests,  
and the rows of triple traffic lights.  
Come through all that and be through  
with getting ready for parties and eight possibilities  
of winning on the numbers,  
cost of living indexes and stock market analyses,  
because it is too late,  
it is way too late,  
get through with and come home  
to the silence afterwards  
that meets you like warm blood hitting your forehead  
and like thunder on the way  
and the sound of great clocks striking  
that make the eardrums quiver,  
because words don't exist any longer,  
there are no more words,  
from now on all talk will take place  
with the voices stones and trees have.

The silence that lives in the grass  
on the underside of every blade  
and in the blue spaces between the stones.  
The silence that follows shots and birdsong.  
The silence that pulls a blanket over the dead body  
and waits in the stairs until everyone is gone.  
The silence  
that lies like a small bird between your hands,  
the only friend you have.

How do you prepare your inner life to receive divine light? I think the silence opens an infinity of secrets. Amen.