“The Big Dream”
Rev. David Gregory
July 21, 2019
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

First reading

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at his feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so, she came to him and asked, “Do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But he answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Second reading
Anodea Judith in The Global Heart Awakens

Our collective initiation from the love of power to the power of love is the drama of our time. Ours is an era that future historians will call a time of Great Awakening, a time when humanity’s monumental challenges stimulated the birth of a new era, a time when the best and worst of humanity played their parts in the fate of human evolution. But if future generations are alive to tell this story, it will be because the best of humanity prevailed and pulled together with a love so profound that the seemingly impossible was achieved.

I have a very big question to ask you this morning, and I want you to think very clearly as I ask it. At this very moment, are there some dirty dishes in your kitchen sink? This may seem like a silly question to ask at the beginning of a Sunday message, and I’m not going to psychoanalyze you based on your answer. I’m not going to go all Marie Kondo on you and make you feel guilty for leaving something out of place while you made your way up the hill this morning. Instead, I want to create a window into a brief episode in today’s gospel portrait involving a woman named Martha and her sister Mary. If we look at other places in the gospel, we might surmise that this is the same Martha and Mary who were the sisters of Jesus’s good friend Lazarus, and that these three figure prominently within his social circle. Though the four gospels do not agree on this, John’s portrait says that it was Mary of Bethany who anointed Jesus’s feet with a wildly expensive ointment, drawing criticism from Judas that it could have been sold and the money given to the poor. The main thing to understand here is the sibling dynamic, something that many of us have some experience with. There’s that sink full of dirty dishes and no one to help with it. “Jesus, don’t you think my sister Mary should be helping me get these out of the way instead of sitting at your feet and hanging on your every word? Then we could all sit down and enjoy what you’re saying.”
In Stone Soup this week, we tended to cut Martha a break, and I for one tend to think that Jesus’s reply to her was spoken out of great love and compassion for her. “Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing.” I would like it if we could spend the next few minutes and perhaps the rest of our lives in contemplation of that “one thing.” I’m wondering if we might find in this ancient dialogue a key to something essential to our way of being in the present world, and maybe even a clue to our own evolution as individual humans who dwell in community.

I feel like the world is just a bunch of dirty dishes right now. I’m not here for a political discussion today. We might not all agree on what the issues are, but we can certainly—without a doubt—see the results that we are reaping. We are locked into a contentious, fractious, bitter, anxious struggle, one that is becoming increasingly polarized. Culturally, we are obsessed with being right. Our rightness necessarily makes others wrong. And we think the answer is in unanimity. We think to ourselves, “If everyone would simply agree with me, we could evolve more quickly. If you would listen to what I’m saying, all the world’s problems could be solved, and you would probably wonder why you didn’t agree with me much sooner. You just haven’t seen the light in the same way that I have.”

We are in a dilemma—culturally, existentially, religiously, philosophically, and politically. It speaks of transition, of liminal spaces, of great change and transformation, and it is not yet clear what that transformation is. It is not easy. It is not fun. It is unsettling. It is uncomfortable, and most of us will not live to see how it is going to turn out. David, David, you are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing. God, please help me find the one thing.

Author Anodea Judith is known for her landmark book which first appeared a quarter of a century ago. The book is entitled Eastern Body, Western Mind. Though it’s undergone a revision or two, it remains as a sort of textbook for healing and transformation of the human soul. Judith weaves her education and experience as a trained psychologist and the spiritual practices of yoga and meditation into a cohesive philosophy of human development and evolution. Over the years, she has taken what has been learned about the healing of the individual soul and brought it into the collective realm of human evolution. Her latest work includes a book entitled The Global Heart Awakens: Humanity’s Rite of Passage from the Love of Power to the Power of Love.

There are numbers of influential people around us who are watching and listening intently, and who all seem to agree on the fact that we are in a time of Great Awakening, a New Reformation, a collective new birth. Our current and older ways of being and doing are not-so-slowly being replaced with new ways of thinking. Younger generations are losing patience with our incremental approach to change, and their rallying cries echo all around us: “Hurry up and change things before it’s too late.” We are in an era of monumental challenges (like climate change) leading to the birth of a new era. But if we stay with the analogy of childbirth, it’s not exactly what we would call a smooth transition. It is not without pain. It is not without labor. It will not happen in a single presidential election, in a single act of Congress or a single decision handed down by the Supreme Court. These are some of our essential important avenues of activism as Americans. These are Martha’s dishes that must be done, but if our focus is only on these avenues, we will become distracted by many things. “There is need,” said Jesus, “of only one thing.” The one thing is love. It is the only source of real and lasting change. “If future generations are alive to tell this story, it will be because the best of humanity prevailed and pulled together with a love so profound that the seemingly impossible was achieved.”
I know that for many, the mere mention of love as the antidote to inhumanity places everything in some sort of idealistic bubble. It sounds like a die-hard liberal, feel-good sort of statement that begs a response like “Well that’s not going to help us in the real world.” Oh, but it is. And guess what! The whole idea of spiritual community, like the one we call “church”—if it has any future at all—will be as a microcosm of the world itself. If we at CCC have any future at all, it is as a prophetic community that along with other prophetic communities can be the incubator that shows the world just how the love of power can be replaced by the power of love. We can show the world how useless the love of power really is by living in community, by being tender-hearted, slow to find fault, and quick to forgive. I don’t know of any ultimate political solution to our problems. After all, it was politics that got a thirty-three year-old insurgent peasant rabbi executed on a cross. But two thousand years later, we’re still talking about him. And that’s because he simply said, “Forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.” There is need of only one thing. And that one thing is love.