

CONTEMPLATION IN ACTION: A CALL TO LOVING PRESENCE

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August 24, 2026

Guest Speaker

Text: Luke 10: 38-42 and Matthew 22: 34-40

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

“When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

These are the words of our ancient tradition.

May the Living Word of God in Scripture be alive within us, among us, and beyond us.

I’m going to add a third story to the mix. I teach memoir writing and have come to believe that our life experiences are an intimate form of scripture. So I offer up a bit of my story to share how the Spirit has moved in my life.

From the time I was nine, I wanted to be a writer. My parents responded by saying, “That’s a hard way to earn a living,” so I tempered my passion by earning my teaching license and getting a job teaching seventh grade English. Much as I tried to convince myself I liked the work, I regularly had morning panic attacks, and the only way I knew to survive was to rise at ungodly hours to write. It was exhausting.

During my third year of teaching, my sister gave birth to a baby who died a month later. I was devastated. I couldn’t focus; I could barely make it through the day. When my spiritual director recommended I take a retreat, I jumped at the idea even though it seemed like an extravagance. I drove north to a log retreat house in the woods. For a weekend, I trudged through the snow on long, tearful walks. I sat in front of a picture window watching the brown leaves of an oak tree rattle in the wind. I wrote a letter to the baby I never got to hold. I finally admitted to myself how unhappy I was teaching. I let grief tear me apart.

Contemplation, according to Walter Burghardt, is a long, loving look at the real. Isn’t that a beautiful definition? In many ways, I understand that weekend as my first intentional experience of contemplation. I took time to be present to the spirit of a child I never met but who nonetheless filled a powerful place in my family. I sat with my wrenching sadness. I took a long, loving look at the real.

When my retreat was over, I closed the front door of the lodge behind me and thought wistfully, “Wouldn’t it be lovely to live here?”

That’s when I heard a clear, unexpected voice ask, “Why not?”

I looked around and saw nothing but trees and snow and gray sky. I was stunned. Those two words introduced a possibility I’d never considered—that perhaps I wasn’t called to be a seventh grade English teacher.

Soon afterward, my life’s trajectory changed. I left the classroom to live in an intentional community, work in retreat ministry, and dedicate myself to writing. That still, small voice realigned my career with my passions and gifts; it reconnected my agency to a source of love; it taught me that Spirit is always yearning to come more alive within me and will nudge me if I listen. I’ve never heard God’s voice that distinctly since, but my body now knows its reality. Morning anxiety attacks became a thing of the past. I found my path.

You know how certain Bible stories poke at you over your life? The Mary/Martha passage is one of mine. From the start, Jesus in this story irritated me: Leave it to the guy not to appreciate the woman in the kitchen! It’s well and good for Mary and Jesus to lounge around talking, but someone’s got to put supper on the table. I’m a doer; I like getting things done. My parents instilled me with a strong work ethic; a refrain in our house was, “Don’t just sit there! Do something.”

Up into my twenties, I figured Jesus got it wrong.

But beginning with that powerful weekend grieving Simon, my respect for Mary’s choice slowly grew. When I gave myself time to write every day, solitude, silence, stillness, and reflection became part of my routine. Writing felt a lot like sitting at Jesus’s feet—it tapped me into a steady wellspring of inspiration and energy. The book I wrote during that time helped me claim my bisexuality, taught me how God reveals Godself in our bodies, and carried me to pulpits and podiums across the country. Writing made me more present to myself and better able to be present to others.

At the retreat center, I learned that the spiritual journey travels a figure 8, from the journey inward into deep, solitary relationship with the divine, to the journey outward, into work, relationships, and service. Our wellbeing and agency depend on the balance. The further inward we go, the more capacity we have to journey outward; the further outward we go, the richer our journey inward. This was precisely what writing did for me. Hundreds of quiet hours with my notebook helped me come out in a big way, and the impact my first book had on others gave me the courage to trust the value of creative solitude.

Richard Rohr’s teachings at the Center for Action and Contemplation are similar. Richard says that the most important word in the Center’s name is *and*. Action and contemplation are two essential aspects of faith. Martha and Mary, the doer and the be-er, the active and the contemplative—both are valuable roles in our shared household.

And Jesus practiced both. He gave his energy to healing, teaching, and uplifting social outcasts. He traveled widely, he interacted with crowds, he pushed against the injustices of religious and political authorities. Like Martha, he was a doer, a mover-and-shaker—someone profoundly effective at changing hearts, minds, and bodies.

He also spent forty days in desert solitude, wrestling with what I believe were his inner devils—self-doubt, ambition, pride. During his ministry he often escaped “to a lonely place.” He instructed his followers to “go into your room, shut the door, and pray in secret to God, who is in secret.” Jesus was like Mary, taking time to be. He was a contemplative.

Jesus' teaching, "Love your neighbor as yourself," beautifully encapsulates this balance between outer and inner work. If our ability to love ourselves determines our capacity for loving neighbors, then we must develop compassion for ourselves, forgive ourselves for our faults, trust our fundamental goodness, and learn gratitude for who we are and what we're given. When we let go of everything that gets in the way of loving our true self, which is holy, we're better able to love our neighbors, who are also holy. That wellspring of inner love feeds our ability to be in service of others.

Jesus invites us to walk the path he walked—to become like him—to even be him, as much as we are able. This means listening carefully for our unique calling—for what brings us alive—then traveling that figure 8, deep into contemplative practice where we connect with our sacred source, and out into service where we meet the divine incarnate, in balance and in ever widening sweeps.

Here's what still pokes me, though. Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the better part. Why? Or, to ask it another way, why do the Quakers teach, "Don't just do something. Sit there!"?

One detail of the Mary/Martha story I never noticed when I was younger, but now seems obvious, is how worried and distracted Martha was. Martha can't see beyond her tasks. She resents Mary. She sounds like a whiny older sibling: "Make her help me."

Maybe this is why I identify with Martha. I'm generally worried and distracted. I struggle to love myself. I'm often resentful. I rarely recognize the divine in our midst, and I suspect I'm not alone. In some way, we're all Marthas.

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed—indeed only one."

Jesus doesn't scold Martha because she's active; in fact, he doesn't scold at all. He just observes. Martha feels obligated first to her chores. She's motivated by a moral imperative, a "should"—we know this because she thinks her sister should be working too. Martha's also worried, maybe about what Jesus will think of the cleanliness of her house (like my mother often was), or the political situation threatening her teacher, or maybe, like the disciples in a similar scene, she's worried about feeding the poor. Worry signals that her mind is elsewhere.

It's important to note here that, despite Richard Rohr's teaching, contemplation and action don't sit on opposing sides of a seesaw. The opposite of contemplation isn't action, it's reaction. Jesus doesn't scold Martha because she's cooking dinner. He scolds her because she's reactive. She's reacting to a "should" much the same way I did when I went into middle school teaching.

Let's imagine another scenario, also inspired by my mother. Picture this: Jesus enters the house. Out of excitement and care, Martha prepares dinner. Her fondness for her teacher and her sister is so powerful, every task becomes a gesture of devotion. She is fully aware of the divine presence in the wheat she grinds, the water she heats, the plates she sets, and the people she serves. She rejoices that her sister is sitting at Jesus's feet, but Martha herself is so full of love, she needs to stir that love into stew and knead it into bread. She thanks God for her energy, skill, and the tasks at hand. Tomorrow she'll honor the sabbath; today she needs to love Jesus by feeding him.

This is how I resolve the riddle of the Mary/Martha story: The "better part" Jesus speaks of is the practice of loving presence. Jesus was a wisdom teacher; he lived by and taught a loving form of mindfulness. That's what he was doing when he climbed the mountains alone. That's what he was up to when he spat in the ground to heal a man's eyes or ate dinner with tax collectors. That's what he leaned into before his brutal death. Before all else, Jesus stayed lovingly present to the divine. Intentionally, in every circumstance, he recognized the distractions, worries, attachments, and mistaken beliefs that stand in the

way of love, and worked to release them. He practiced humility and gratitude and generosity. He grew in his capacity for love.

The central reality of Jesus's life was this: He loved God, with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. He lived by the greatest commandment, in every moment.

The path Jesus taught is what the French Carmelite mystic Brother Lawrence called "The practice of the presence of God." In fact, in the Christian contemplative tradition, "Presence" with a capital P is a name for God. Jesus called himself the way, the truth, and the life because practicing loving presence, as he modeled, taps us into the source of life.

How can we grow in presence? Christianity has a vast tradition that answers this question. Richard Rohr calls it the "alternative orthodoxy." It's our mystical lineage, with origins in Jesus's life. This beautiful inheritance teaches us to sink our roots into a dark, mysterious relationship where we find nourishment and support. The deeper the roots, the wider and stronger our branches.

This September, thanks to a grant from the Lilly Foundation, Plymouth begins a two-year immersion in Christian spiritual practices. We're calling this program, "Contemplation in Action" because practicing divine presence means being active in our contemplation and contemplative in our actions. The goal of the program is to anchor our lives as individuals and as a community in patterns that cultivate loving presence. Over two years, we will dive into Christianity's wellspring with three cohorts, congregational retreats, opportunities to connect with other congregations, small group offerings, and in worship.

Neither contemplation nor action are our goals. They are two mutually intertwining means for our ultimate goal: Loving God, self, and neighbor. They are how we can choose the better part, which is capital P Presence. I would never have heard that still, small voice within me asking, "Why not?" if I hadn't gone on retreat, been quiet, and finally felt my grief. From the ashes of loss, God stirred up my vocation. The stillness and rest that initially seemed indulgent revealed themselves to be effective ways to break down walls in me that got in the way of love.

So the good news is that Jesus invites us to release our distractions and set aside our cares. Christ's presence is here, now, and we're invited to show up to it. Luckily, we have the immense gift of Christianity's contemplative tradition, which teaches us how. We can learn the "better part." Together we can grow in our ability to love divine Presence wherever and however we find it, with all our hearts and minds and strength.

Amen.