
Christ in Us – Hope and Prophecy

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Proper 11 – Year C

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and our redeemer. Amen. —Psalm 19:14 (adapt.)

I'm intrigued by something that's happening again. The same scripture reading has been appointed on the same day that something similar is happening. It's as if it was meant to be. And to add to my sense of intrigue this 'something similar' is something that connects the sublime with the ridiculous on the one hand, and the sublime with the mundane on the other hand. First, here's the connection between the sublime and the ridiculous that occurs with our gospel for today.

The Gospel and the Comic

In Luke's gospel Jesus refuses to take away from a woman of his day the privilege of learning from him as any man would be privileged to sit and listen to an esteemed rabbi. Indeed it's her sublime dignity that Jesus acknowledges when he affirms Mary's choosing "the better part," as he calls it. The gospel message here is all the more sublime because it triumphs over Martha's appeal for equal treatment: "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" (Luke 10:40) It's as if she's saying to Jesus, 'Don't you care that I be treated equally as my sister with the treatment that all women are accorded in our society?' But Jesus as always brings into our world a new standard that surpasses our social norms. It's as if he's saying to Martha, 'Something new is breaking-in here that overturns ordinary standards of equality.'

And now let's turn to a ridiculous feature that's also occurring today. This year in our church calendar we have this gospel about women and housework appointed on the same day as the birthday of that most comic of all housewives, Phyllis Diller. That's right, July 17 is the annual return of Phyllis Diller's birthday. While she died 4 years ago in 2012 at the age of 95, she was born 99 years ago on July 17 in 1917. And here's the serendipity feature of her birthdate coinciding with our gospel about women and housework. It's remarkable that this pioneer in women's standup comedy staked her entire professional career on the identity being a housewife. In fact Diller only began her career after years of being an actual housewife. hilariously, that is to say, she made a career out of impersonating herself—her own identity as a housewife!

First she would dress herself in flamboyant clothes, wear an eccentric hairdo, and carry a long cigarette holder that made her look like a housewife trying to take a break from housework in her own living room. Then she would deliver one liner jokes that made fun of her own failures to keep up with all that housework. Probably the best example to begin with is the one where she concedes that housework is probably not bad for you. "Housework can't kill you," she began. "But why take a chance?" After that classic line there are many more like it.

I'm eighteen years behind in my ironing;

or

I buried a lot of my ironing in the back yard.

So we can appreciate that she had a particular issue with ironing. Like this one:

The only time I ever enjoyed ironing was the day I accidentally got gin in the steam iron.

And here's her advice for cooking at home:

Best way to get rid of kitchen odors: Eat out. (Accessed 7/16/2016 at <http://quotes.lifehack.org/by-author/phyllis-diller/>)

Well, we get the picture. Housework is something to be avoided if you can get away with it.

But that's not so in today's gospel. Certainly the gospel quotes Jesus' declaring that Mary has chosen "the better part" by sitting and listening rather than helping with housework. And centuries of commentaries have represented this comment by Jesus as a spiritual preference for the contemplative life over the active life; in other words, a preference for listening and learning like Mary over managing affairs and meeting people's needs like Martha. But subsequent reflections typically affirm both; affirm that both the contemplative and the active are needed for a holistic and holy life. Therefore "the better part" that Jesus invokes is a relative 'better part' and not an absolute. It's the better part in a given context or given situation but not in every context and situation. This reminds me of one my mentors telling me, "Thee, sometimes it's not time for a counseling session; it's time to take the garbage out."

From the Sublime to the Mundane

Now with this comment we are combining the sublime with the mundane—with the ordinary and everyday; with the need also to do housework and homework including the need for good government and statecraft. (Note that the Bible's word for 'house' in Greek, *oikos*, is the root of our word, 'economics'—literally, *oikonomos*, house laws.) That is to say, in the tradition of centuries of commentary on today's gospel we are combining the contemplative and the active life in a holistic and holy way; both are ingredients for a holy life. If you can believe it, even the ridiculous-acting comedienne Phyllis Diller was aware of and invoked this holistic perspective in her following observation. In addition to making fun of herself as a housewife she also said:

I wanted to become me, totally me. The more me, the better. I instinctively knew this and I was right. (Accessed 7/16/2016 at <http://quotes.lifehack.org/quote/phyllis-diller/i-wanted-to-become-me-totally-me/>)

And this holistic framework or big picture perspective leads us to the other scriptures appointed for today: our Old Testament lesson from Amos and our epistle passage in Colossians. Turning first to Colossians we hear this affirmation of the sublime:

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation ...
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

and through him God was pleased to reconcile to [God]self all things, whether on earth or in heaven ... And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [Christ] has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—

To [whom] God chose to make known how great ... are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:15, 19, 20-22, 27)

What if, church friends, what if with this perspective from Colossians we were ourselves becoming what Phyllis Diller called 'becoming me, totally me. The more me, the better.' And what if the mystery of the ages that is invoked in Colossians is a mystery that some of us instinctively know is right: that we ourselves are created and destined as God-beings who only seem to be separate from God and from each other, but who are actually glorified in God and with each other?

Now that question leads to our final scripture reading appointed for today: a reading from the Book of the Prophet Amos. "This is what the Lord God showed me," Amos declared.

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land,
saying, "When will the new moon [and the Sabbath] be over so that we may ... practice deceit with false balances,
buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals ..."

Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?

... The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but they shall not find it. (Amos 8:4-6, 8, 11-12)

A Tale of Two Prophecies

Here we have an exact reversal of our gospel story appointed for today: the eager Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus, earnest to receive and absorb every word from the mouth and mind of the teacher. By contrast, the prophet Amos warns us, we who mistreat the poor and needy in our land with greed and injustice will inherit the inability to hear and learn what is needed for our wisdom and prosperity. That is exactly our economic peril in these United States today: that national prosperity is correlated with income equality for the middle class, the working class and the working poor, and that prosperity will fail as economic equality continues to fail.

For the sake of brevity we may summarize this perspective with a typical study updated last fall (October 2015). “The broad facts of income inequality over the past six decades are easily summarized,” the article begins. Then the following data are presented:

- The years from the end of World War II into the 1970s were ones of substantial economic growth and broadly shared prosperity.
 - Incomes grew rapidly and at roughly the same rate up and down the income ladder, roughly doubling ... between the late 1940s and early 1970s ...
- Beginning in the 1970s, economic growth slowed and the income gap widened...
 - The concentration of income at the very top of the distribution rose to levels last seen more than 80 years ago (during the “Roaring Twenties”).
- Wealth [is] the value of a household’s property and financial assets, minus the value of its debts ... [In the U.S. this] is much more highly concentrated than income. The best survey data show that the top 3 percent of the distribution hold over half of all wealth. Other research suggests ... an even smaller percentage at the *very* top, whose share has been rising over the last three decades.

Data from a variety of sources contribute to this broad picture of strong growth and shared prosperity for the early postwar period, followed by slower growth and growing inequality since the 1970s. (Accessed 7/16/2016 at www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/a-guide-to-statistics-on-historical-trends-in-income-inequality)

Now here’s one of the most compelling features of human experience. It’s particularly compelling as our eyes tend to glaze over when we hear economic and financial data. It’s the experience of people acting against their own best interests. Here we have repeated data and confirmed information that increased inequality reduces prosperity for all of us. Yet we seem paralyzed or lack the national will to intervene and reverse rising inequality.

In the spiritual terms offered by our scriptures today that phenomenon is the moral equivalent of “a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.” The spiritual message here and ethical message here is that the more we fail to listen and learn in the contemplative mode the more we become incapable of listening and learning in our own interest and for our own good. Thus we risk incurring Amos’ prophecy: ‘Though they wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; running to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, they shall not find it’ (8:11-12).

But how can we conclude on such a gloomy note, given our overall scripture framework for today? For today we are presented with a glorious offer and a promise that we can become who we are created and destined to be. And that is why we pray this Collect or opening prayer appointed for today:

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord... (Accessed 7/16/2016 at www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Pentecost/CProp11_RCL.html)

So finally it is for the sake of becoming who we are created and destined to be that we may choose the glorious riches prophesied in Colossians to the worldly riches we are cautioned about in Amos' direful prophecy:

[For to you] God chose to make known how great ... are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27).

My sisters and brothers, may we become wealthy with the glory of *these* riches—the riches of Christ in us, “the hope of glory.”

In the name of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.