

**“Workism”**16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 10: 38-42

July 21, 2019

Rev. Rob Carter

**“Workism”**

This is the way the Italian poet Giuseppe Belli portrayed the dialogue we just read between Martha and the Messiah.

*“But Jesus Christ,” said Martha, “I’ve had it to here with Mary Magdalene. I cannot take her rosaries, her novenas anymore. I open my mouth and she calls me a troublemaker. I’m tied up day and night. I’ve never complained, but I’m getting tired—I’m always on my feet; you can’t find this painted doll of a saint except, of course, where there’s something to eat.”*

*“Look Martha,” the savior said, ‘here where it’s at. You don’t deserve any explanation, but (Mary’s) job’s more important. It’s as simple as that.”*

*“So says you,” adds Martha, “but I know better. Listen, if I sat around on my salvation the way she does, who’d be keeping this house together?”<sup>1</sup>*

Belli adeptly summarizes how Jesus’ words to Martha are unfair at best, and offensive at worst.

There she is, working her tale off to host her and Mary’s dear friend and teacher. She’s set the table. She’s swept the floor, and she’s bene basting the meat and kneading the potatoes while Mary just sits on her tuchus, listening to Jesus.

It seems unbalanced, doesn’t it? Martha’s doing more than her fair share. In fact, Martha seems to be doing it all. Which seems to’ve been par for the course. It’s been a perpetual struggle getting Mary to focus on the work that, to Martha, so obviously needs to be done.

So now that Jesus is over... Martha thinks she has an ally to back her up. “Jesus, throw me a line here. Tell Mary to help.”

But this is the help Jesus gives. “Martha, Martha, poor distracted Martha, you’re worried and distracted by so many things that, in the end, don’t matter one bit. Not one bit. Mary, on the hand, is focusing on what does matter. Mary has chosen the better part... and you should, too.”

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Now... if you’re like me—if you’re a Type A personality like Martha seems to be... If you tend to be more comfortable moving than resting... If you can’t relax until all the i’s have been dotted and t’s have been crossed, then you may be a little offended here, too.

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<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli, *Sonnets of Giuseppe Belli*, trans. And introduction by Miller Williams (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) as printed in *Resources for Preaching and Worship: Year C*, compiled by Hanna Ward and Jennifer Wild (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 214.

I mean, isn't work necessary? Isn't work a requirement within the life of discipleship? Don't we call it, "kingdom work," striving to spread the hope and love and justice of the Jesus Christ?

Is sitting at Jesus' feet really all that all discipleship entails? Let's all just sit on our collective tuchus listening for the Word of God?

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A few weeks ago I happened upon a fascinating article in *The Atlantic* by Derek Thompson. It was about a word I'd never heard before. "Workism." Have you heard of it?

Different but related to the word "workaholic"—one who's addicted to work—*workism* is "the belief that work is (supposed to be) the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose."<sup>2</sup> It's the idea that, more than anywhere else, humanity is supposed to derive our source of fulfillment from our jobs.

Thompson shares quite a bit of research demonstrating the ways in which more and more of our society is shifting from a perspective of going to work in order to live... to now, in many cases, living in order to work. Now, more than ever it seems, college-educated adults in office jobs are spending more than 35-40 hours of week at work not because they have to, but because they *want* to.

"It's where they feel most themselves."<sup>3</sup> It's where they are choosing to invest their sense of self-worth... their sense of success or failure... connecting the quality of their life with the quality of their job.

Thompson points to many issues contributing to this shift... from more people seeking higher education to more emphasis being placed upon the idea of upward mobility. But the chief proponent of this shift, as he and other scholars see it, is the decline in religion throughout society.

He writes, "Some people worship beauty, some worship political identities, and others worship their children. But everybody worships something. And *workism* is among the most potent of the new religions competing for congregants."<sup>4</sup>

But he poignantly notes... "Our desks were never meant to be our altars. The modern labor force evolved to serve the needs of consumers and capitalists, not to satisfy tens of millions of people seeking transcendence at the office."<sup>5</sup>

Said another way... rather than work serving as a means to an end... "workism" prioritizes the act of working itself to a point that work becomes the objective, in and of itself.

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That, I suspect, is part of Marth's issue. It's not that she found her own sense of self-worth being derived from her work... nor do I think she was suffering from the grips of *workism*

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Thompson, *The Atlantic*, "Working Is Making Americans Miserable: For the college-educated elite, work has morphed into a religious identity—promising transcendence and community, but failing to deliver." <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

... although I do think *workism* is a serious threat to living life fully. Rather, Martha got so lost in her work that she lost sight of the reason she was working so hard to begin with. Jesus Christ... to love him and learn from him and support him.

So Jesus reminded her... “Martha, Martha, Martha... You’re so distracted! Why are you more concerned with who’s setting the table than the people at the table? Why are you more focused on the details of who’s laboring more than the very presence of God right before your very eyes?”

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So let’s be clear. It’s not that work doesn’t matter, or that work isn’t important. It is! It’s terribly important. Working to spread the love, the peace, the hope, the comfort, the justice of God’s kingdom is as vital today as it’s ever been.

But if we’re to do the work of God’s kingdom, we can’t lose sight of our motivation in the first place.

For if God’s kingdom *isn’t* the reason we do what we do ...  
 if we lose sight of why we’re setting the table in the first place...  
 if we lose sight of why we’re going to that meeting...  
 if we lose sight of why we’re donating of our hard-earned money...  
 if we lose sight of why we’re spending our time and energy, our sweat and tears in the first place...  
 if we lose sight of the one who holds us all together in this community called Towson Presbyterian Church...  
 then it becomes all too easy to get distracted by meaningless debates and procedures until everything becomes a chore... and anxiety grows... and resentment sets in.

It’s then—when we focus more on the work than the motivation behind the work—that we can be sure we’re failing to choose “the better part,” as Jesus put. When the work we’re called to do simply becomes a chore.

That was Martha’s problem. It wasn’t that her work didn’t matter. Rather, she’d forgotten why she was doing it in the first place.

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There’s a lesson in here for me, I know. I suspect there’s a lesson in here for you. And I know there’s a lesson in here for us as a church, TPC.

Work done without a clear sense of purpose... decisions made without a proper perspective... it inevitably leads to anxiety, resentment, and burnout.

So the next time you’re sitting in a church meeting wondering where it’s headed...  
 The next time you begin to feel a bit unbalanced yourself... like you’re carrying too much weight, or perhaps not doing enough...  
 Ask yourself why you’re doing what you’re doing.  
 Is it for Jesus Christ? Is it in pursuit of the kingdom of God? Is it to support people you love... a cause God’s placed on your heart?

If not... if it's none of these things... then perhaps it's time to reconsider what you're doing... and refocus on the call God has placed within you. Because work done from a place of focus and purpose... work done from the position of Christ's feet... work done with clearly defined motivation isn't just important... it's powerful. It's what we call "kingdom work." The kind of work that transforms the workers, and the world around them. Amen.