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A reflection on Amos 8:1-12, Col. 1:15-28, and Luke 10:38-42.

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“Workers of Love”

We might be tempted to think that the story about the visit to Martha and Mary tells us simply that to sit and listen at the feet of Jesus is better than working to look after a guest, but I think that would miss the depth and breadth of the message. Jesus said, “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.” Jesus does not say Martha you shouldn't be working to show hospitality to a guest in your house. Jesus does not say to Mary you shouldn't be helping your sister. Jesus simply says to Martha that she is worried and distracted by many things and that Mary, by listening to and hearing the words of Jesus, has chosen the better part. At face value the story leaves us feeling unsatisfied. Jesus appears to rebuke poor Martha for doing the things that need to be done while he affirms Mary for sitting in the midst of this activity and merely listening. It may make us feel bad for Martha and perhaps a little resentful of Mary. The answer to this dilemma lies in our other readings.

Amos was the first prophet whose own words have been preserved in the biblical texts. The preceding prophetic books are books *about* prophets but for Amos the people saw fit to preserve his actual words. Why was that? For many scholars it is because Amos takes prophecy in a new direction. Instead of prophesying that God will punish only the King or other leader's for the nation's evils, Amos says that God will hold the people as a whole responsible for their actions.¹ He spoke directly to the people not as a professional prophet or as the son of a prophet but as a, “herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14), a working man who had been told by God to, “Go, prophecy to my people Israel” (Amos 7:15). Amos was preaching during a period of stability and prosperity about 750 BCE. There were no threats from neighbouring powers but

¹ Boadt, L. *Reading the Old Testament* (Paulist Press, New York, 1984) pp. 319.

there was an apparent breakdown in the system of family and tribal landownership. This resulted in the emergence of a wealthy class of people at the top of the social structure, and where there are wealthy people there are by definition those who are poor and dispossessed.

Amos says, “the Lord said to me, ‘the end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.’” (Amos 8:2). God is not only condemning the King or the religious leaders but the people themselves, “Hear this you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land...buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweeping of the wheat.” (Amos 8:4). I will turn your feasts into mourning and all your songs into lamentation;... I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.” (Amos 8:10). These are harsh prophecies but the harshest prophecy is yet to come. “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 word of the Lord.” (Amos 8:11). It is the inability to listen to and hear the word of the Lord that is the most dire prediction that Amos makes.

Remember Martha and Mary? “Martha, Martha you are worried and distracted by many things.” The people of Israel to whom Amos was preaching were distracted by their desire for wealth, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?” The people are not condemned for working or selling grain, they are condemned for the reasons that they do it and the manner in which they do it, to amass wealth at the cost of the poor. Martha is not rebuked for looking after her houseguest, she is rebuked for worrying about the details of how and at what speed this is to be done. Rather than living in this moment of grace where there is opportunity to show love of neighbour through shared food and conversation, Martha is buzzing around like a beehive on Benzedrine. Is there enough bread, is it fresh enough? Will this cheese and these olives and this wine be good enough for this honoured guest? Are the floors swept, the carpets beaten? And on and on and on.

Mary has chosen the better part. She sits at the feet of Jesus and has heard his word. She knows that there will be enough food and that it will be completely acceptable because it will be shared in love and in community. She knows that the

state of the house will be acceptable because it has been opened in hospitality. Even if their home had been a dirt-floored hovel and the shared food a crust of dry bread and a cup of tepid water, or even if there had been no food at all, Mary knows that it would have been more than acceptable to Jesus. Jesus isn't worried about the quantity or quality of the food, the richness and cleanliness of the house, it is the way that these are shared that's important. If they're shared because in our hearts we have the love of God and the love of neighbour these worries and distractions disappear. If we have heard the word of the Lord, and we live out our lives in that sure knowledge, we will know that whatever and however we share with our neighbours will be acceptable.

Paul says of Christ, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." He says that we will be holy and blameless and irreproachable before him – provided that we continue securely established and steadfast in the faith...promised by the gospel that you heard." Paul says that we have been reconciled with God through the mighty acts of the incarnate Christ. Through his life, death and resurrection we have been promised eternal life. By steadfast faithfulness to his teachings we have also been shown the way to a gracious and satisfying earthly life. A life where we are not worried about when the new moon or the Sabbath will be over so that we can get back to the business of amassing wealth at the cost of the poor. A life where opening our homes and our lives to share the gifts of God's creation with our neighbours will not be an occasion for worry and distraction but an opportunity to live out our gospel faith; an opportunity to share graciously whatever we have. The story of Martha and Mary may seem a small thing but its implications go far beyond the obvious. If the people of Israel during the time of Amos had listened to and really heard the word of the Lord this sense of gracious hospitality would not have allowed them to buy the poor for silver or a pair of sandals, they would not have sold the sweepings of the wheat but shared the best of the grain. If like Mary we sit and listen to the words of Jesus there will be no famine of hearing God's word but rather God's word will shape all that we do. Where our work is undertaken out of

a deep love of God that is expressed by concern for those around us. We will be called to a life where we are to be workers of Love and not lovers of work. Thanks be to God