

Karen Hollis | July 17, 2022

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

**First Reading: Amos 8:1-12 (Alter)**

Thus did the Master, the Lord, show me: And, look, a basket of summer's-end fruit. And He said to me, "What do you see, Amos?" And I said, "A basket of summer's-end fruit." And the Lord said to me:

The end has come upon My people Israel.

I will no longer forgive them.

And the palace's songstresses shall howl

on that day, said the Lord:

"Many corpses flung everywhere. Hush!"

Hear this, who trample the needy,

destroying the poor of the land,

saying, "When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain, and

the sabbath, that we may trade in wheat?"

to use a short ephah measure and an oversize shekel-weight

and to tilt cheating scales,

to buy the indigent with silver

and the needy for the price of sandals,

and we may sell chaff as grain."

The Lord has sworn by the Pride of Jacob:

I will never forget their acts.

For this should not the earth shudder

and all its dwellers mourn?

It shall rise, altogether, like the Nile,

heave and sink like the Nile of Egypt.

And it shall happen on that day, said the Lord,

I will make the sun set at noon

and darken the earth on a day of light.

And I will turn your festivals into mourning

and all your songs into lament,

And lay sackcloth on all loins

and every head a shaved pate.

And I will make her as the mourning for an only child

and her end as a bitter day.

Look, days are coming, said the Lord,

when I will let loose famine in the land,

not famine for bread

and not thirst for water

but for hearing the words of the Lord.

And they shall wander from sea to sea,

and from the north to the east they shall roam

to seek the Lord's word,

but they shall not find it.

**Luke 10:38-42 (NRSV, edited)** Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word." 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 the Lord 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."

All of the texts this morning pose a bit of a challenge – how do we read them? We're faced with portrayals of an angry God. The gospel text has been read and re-read, interpreted and reinterpreted to try and understand what Jesus is trying to say about the role of women in work and prayer. While I'm not going to be able to address all of it, I do hope to offer enough context and reframe to get us thinking some more.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Christ's name we pray. Amen

At the peak of gardening season, it's wise to divide the work into doable chunks. Weeding is a big job . . . much too big to do it all at once. I usually set a goal of one row per gardening session, because it's hard on the body, even at my age. When I attended Cynthia Bourgeault's Intro to Wisdom School – Bourgeault is an Episcopal Priest and well-known theologian – I was heartened to hear her discuss the importance of pairing physical work with study and prayer. In fact, instead of weeding a row at a time, she would say work for a set period of time and when that time is up, put away your tools and leave the rest for the next time.

Have you ever noticed how physical work gives your brain space to process? For me it's different from taking a walk. Pulling weeds or chopping wood helps me process thoughts and sort or express emotions. It's like the physical weeding is actually weeding the psyche. It can also work for dishes or other indoor tasks that have to be done regularly. My favourite is actually cleaning horse stalls. I've checked it out and others agree with me that there is something special about scooping manure that is great for internal processing.

Bourgeault encourages her students to take this monastic approach to work and prayer. When we pair them together, we are able to get more out of both. After sitting in prayer or study, the body wants to move. Tasks like raking or chopping wood engage the body without requiring intense thought or problem solving, which also gives the mind an opportunity to work in the background. We can return refreshed to study and prayer, able to see deeper, and with new eyes.

Today's texts are well served by this practice, to dig down into the text. The Mary and Martha story is especially heavily burdened with generations of wrestling and interpretation . . . why is sister against sister? Why does Jesus seem to elevate prayer and study over service? Why is the story so binary, so black and white?

A close read of this passage with fresh eyes reveals that something is missing. In Greek, the word “also” appears in the second verse we read this morning. The King James is the only English translation I’m aware of that got it right – I don’t know why it was omitted by the others. The King James version reads: “Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus’ feet, and heard his word.” (I also don’t know why the word “which” is used here to refer to Mary, instead of who – this passage would be a good research project . . . for this morning, the important word is “also”) This translation reveals that both sisters have an established practice of sitting at the feet of Jesus, which means they are his disciples.

So, both sisters are disciples. The text doesn’t actually say that Mary is present for the conversation . . . just that she is also a disciple. Martha comes to Jesus, because she is at her limit. The Greek word that is translated “work” and “tasks” is diakonia, the root for diaconal or deacon. The word doesn’t mean tasks or housework. It means service or ministry. In the Anglican church, “deacons are agents of the church in word, action, and attendance, who lead the people of God in carrying the light of Christ into places of darkness.”<sup>1</sup> Martha is a deacon . . . she is burdened by her ministry, by the weight of the concerns of her community, by the responsibility of organizing and resourcing people, and meeting the myriad of needs around her. She comes and talks with Jesus, saying my sister left . . . she left me here to do this ministry all on my own. Won’t you make her come back home and help me? Martha is embodying her call . . . and she has lost her balance. Jesus can clearly see Martha’s stress . . . but the answer is not to take from Mary her own learning and the pursuit of her own call.

I have a sister and can appreciate the longing to serve together. At our best, sisters have a short-hand with one another, can intuit the other’s moves, and serve seamlessly side by side. At our best, there is a commitment to see things through together with the joy of sisterly cooperation. I can appreciate Martha’s longing for her sister to be home, where she is safe and secure.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/ministry/om/diaconate/>

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<sup>2</sup> Enfleshed July 17, 2022

In this season on Gabriola of abundance, visitors, busyness, how do you find yourself? Are you being nourished as much as you are giving to others? Are you asking for help where you need it? Is there an issue you would bring to Jesus?

Instead of seeing Mary as the solution, Jesus addresses Martha's frazzled state by reminding her that the answers aren't out there . . . the answers are within. There is need of only one thing: remember who you are, whose you are . . . come back to the Holy that lives in you, come back to yourself, come back to your call.

There are many ways to lose balance in life . . . Martha is trying to practice sustainable ministry, which we all know is a constant challenge and work in progress. There are other ways to come out of balance. Amos provides a warning about the shadow of having too much and losing touch with the source of abundance. Unlike many Biblical texts, Amos can be dated quite precisely within the 8<sup>th</sup> century. He lived at a time of peace in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He was a shepherd who heard a call from God. Some may struggle this morning to hear a portrayal of an angry God . . . the passage needs our curiosity. Why might God be angry? Amos felt called to travel to the city to address the entitlement of the wealthy and call out the oppression of the peasants. He was the first prophet we know of who proclaimed God's justice and solidarity with the least of these. The movement of God embodied in Amos won't stand for this injustice. Amos' warning to the crowds is harsh and righteous . . . he tells them: you still technically practice your faith, but it is empty if you spend the Sabbath waiting for the hour when the markets open once again. Their prayer is empty and their work is done without gratitude . . . and it is evident in the way they treat people on the margins. Amos calls out this hypocrisy . . . as Jesus does many times. While God's overarching movement is to be in relationship with God's people . . . we don't always need the same thing from God to hold up our end of that relationship. In some seasons we need a righteous voice to exasperate us. Greta Thunberg, the young climate activist is a good example. In other seasons we might need God's prophetic challenge or a voice of hope in the darkness. Sometimes we need a come-to-Jesus moment to get us to engage again . . . sometimes we are so weary from engaging that we need Jesus' personal reminder to come back to ourselves.

Bourgeault's monastic relationship between study/prayer and work is similar to Richard Rohr's *Action and Contemplation*. Rohr, who is also a priest and prominent theologian, also affirms our need to move from our place of prayer into service . . . and bring those experiences serving back to our prayer . . . like the ebb and flow of the tides. This engagement keeps us grounded in God, while connecting and investing in the world around us. This movement is particularly life giving when we do it in community. One aspect of diakonia – that word that is used to describe Martha's activities – is cooperation . . . cooperating in service of others. While each of us is ultimately self-responsible for maintaining our own sense of balance (with the support of others when needed), Martha is right . . . there is a goodness and a joy in ministering together. The kin-dom opens when we join our hands and hearts in service.