

Afterthoughts on “Martha, Martha, Martha”

By Pastor Susan Schnieders

This past Sunday’s readings contrasted the two kinds of busyness that distract us from the Lord’s presence and voice. In the readings from Amos 8:1-12, God quotes Israel:

“When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah smaller and the shekel heavier and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”

In this first kind of busyness, God reveals Israel’s idolatry of commerce - they want to be busy with their business (interesting that busyness and business are basically the same word). They cloak their idolatrous hearts in a semblance of religion - they won’t sell during the new moon nor on the Sabbath, which would be a violation of the law. So on the outside, they look moral. However, the dialogue reveals their true hearts - disdain for the law in that it restricts them from what they *really* want to do. They really want to be about buying and selling, and their intent is to deceive and take advantage of others to improve their own profit. In short, they want to be all about their own business their own way, but look good on the outside doing it.

In the gospel reading (Luke 10:38-42), Jesus mediates a budding conflict between two sisters, Mary and Martha. Martha is busy with serving her friend Jesus and all his associates. No doubt she holds him in high esteem, and she also has respect for the gender-based cultural expectations of her time. A woman’s place literally was in the kitchen, serving the men, and she expected Jesus to correct her sister, Mary, who was defying this norm by sitting at the feet of Jesus like one of his male students. Not only was Martha struggling with the overwhelm of doing good with little help, she was also frustrated with her sister’s apparent disregard for the cultural “right.”

Just as Israel wants to appear righteous, so also Martha wants to appear righteous. Both generous hospitality to guests and women knowing their “place” were culturally correct, and knowing Jesus to be a righteous man, Martha expects Jesus to uphold this. But to her surprise, he doesn’t. Rather than correcting Mary, it is Martha that receives a gentle but firm correction. *“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.”*

Martha was so distracted and worried that Jesus had to speak her name twice to get her full attention. And this, in fact, is the one thing Jesus implied was needed - her attention. This is what he commended Mary for even though she defied social convention to do it. Isn’t it interesting that Jesus commends Mary for doing the outwardly “wrong” thing for the right reasons while correcting Martha for doing the outwardly “right” thing with the “wrong” heart? God condemns Israel for the same thing in Amos - appearing to obey the law with the wrong intentions and motives in their hearts.

So how do we do the right thing with the right heart? Well, we have to start like Mary did, at the feet of Jesus, gazing at his face while he teaches about the kingdom, truth, and love. We must not get caught up

in *doing for* Jesus **before** we spend time *being with* him. Embedded in Christian tradition is the idea that action emanates from contemplation. That is, we discover truly what we are to do, how to do it, and with what motive to do it *only* as we spend time with God, where our characters are transformed into his likeness and our ears hear his voice. This is why God's judgment in Amos is so tragic - he says in Amos 8:11-12: "*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.*" Can you imagine becoming so habitually distracted from the Lord's voice that eventually you cannot even hear it? Martha had to hear her name twice before she really heard the Lord. How many times does the Lord have to call us before we stop and listen?

This is why Scripture warns us, "*Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion*" (Heb 3:15). To go about our business without having first attended (paid attention) to the Lord risks our doing the wrong thing or doing the right thing with the wrong heart or intent. All righteous action is rooted in spending intimate face-time with our Rabbi, Jesus. Jesus himself said, "*For I have never spoken on My own initiative or authority, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment regarding what to say and what to speak.*" (John 12:49, Amplified Bible) Jesus acted based on what he heard from his Father in his time with God. Presence with God preceded the proclamation of God. Being with precedes doing for.

To prioritize time with God and act based on how *he* teaches and transforms us during that time is counter-cultural. Our culture idolizes busyness. Pastor Patrick said in his sermon, "Mary was a scandalous woman for all the right reasons." May we, too, become scandalous people for all the right reasons. Spend some time at Rabbi Jesus's feet, gazing into his wonderful face and listening to his voice. Then go do as he says.