

Jim Gill

July 17, 2016

"The Better Part"  
Amos 8;1-12 Luke 10:38-42 Colossians 1:15-28

INTRODUCTION TO AMOS 8:1-12

We live in a world of words. We are not at a loss for words. We are surrounded on every side. Amos points to a time where there would be a famine for the word of God. Listen to his warnings. Listen for the word of the Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 10:38-42

Yesterday at our presbytery meeting we were led in worship by 6 pastors. In celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first woman ordained to be a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, all 6 pastors were women. It was a moving service. This morning we read about two women, sisters Mary and Martha. Will you please stand for the gospel lesson from Luke 10:38-42.

Let's pray, Lord thank you for these sisters. Thank you for this the account of this encounter that serves as a reminder to us that there is a time and a place for everything. In these moments, help us to focus on the message you have for us contained in this portion of your word.

\*\*\*

How many of you remember the classic Billy Crystal movie "City Slickers?" (It was 25 years ago.) In the movie three long-time friends face middle age. In their middle-age crisis they find themselves losing their focus and in danger of losing their families.

To reignite the fire in their lives the guys sign up as "cowboys," helping a dude ranch move its herd of cattle from high in the hills down to the lower valley. "Curly," the grizzled old cowboy who leads them, seems to be the toughest, wisest person they have ever met. Billy Crystal asks the usually tight-lipped cowpoke what his secret is. What makes his life so strong and centered and sure. Curly smiles, raises his grubby, gloved index finger and proclaims, "It is just one thing." Then he rides away.

Billy's character spends the rest of the movie frantically trying to figure out what Curly meant. What IS that "just one thing?"

Psychologists, marriage counselors, relationship gurus of all stripes, warn us not to expect one person to provide for all our emotional, intellectual, and relational needs. We need a variety of relationships, a network of our spouse, friends, and colleagues from work, golfing buddies, 42 buddies, children, elders, and peers, to meet all our relational needs.

But what might be true for our human connections does not hold true for our spiritual needs. No matter what your denomination, no matter if your spiritual temperament is: exuberant, reserved, flamboyant, or meditative, whether your soul craves cathedrals, or soars under a blue sky, it is all the same as long as we have that “one thing.”

I think that the “one thing” is what Mary was seeking at the feet of Jesus. It was the better part.

A time management guru, a professor in the business school at Harvard, speaks about A, B, and C priorities, and then he notes that too many people spend too much of their time on the C priorities! And then he asks, “Why do you think that is?” The answer is that the C priorities are, first, much easier to accomplish, and, second, give you the impression that you are actually getting something done. In other words you can keep busy with the C priorities all day and never get to the more important things. The lesson from Mary and Martha is “Don’t let the good (the C priorities) get in the way of the best (the A priorities).”

In his sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Don’t worry about things—food, drink, money, and clothes. For you already have life and a body—and they are for more important than what to eat and wear. Look at the birds! They don’t worry about what to eat—they don’t need to sow or reap or store up food—for your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are far more valuable to Him than they are. Will all your worries add a single moment to your life? And why worry about your clothes? Look at the field lilies! They don’t worry about theirs. Yet King Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as beautifully as they. And if God cares so wonderfully for flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, won’t he more surely care for you o men of little faith? SO don’t worry at all about having enough food and clothing. Why be like the heathen? For they take pride in all this things and are deeply concerned about them. But your heavenly Father already knows perfectly well that you need them. And He will gladly give them to you if you give him FIRST Place in your life. So don’t be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time. (Matt. 6:25-34 Living Bible)

A small bird has made a nest on top of a pillar in our covered porch. This week I thought I would help her out. I put a plate on the floor with some sunflower kernels. I was pleased to see the next morning that some of the kernels were gone! But the next time I looked I saw a squirrel scurrying away. I guess I should leave it to the Lord to provide for the birds of the air because I seem to provide for the squirrels of the ground.

Jesus tells us not to worry about those things. HOWEVER, Martha IS worried. She is worrying about what THEY are going to eat and drink. She is worrying about how she is going to get it all done. She is busy rushing around trying to make sure everything is perfect.

She reminds me of a famous Martha from our time, Martha Stewart. I can imagine Martha Stewart fussing over the perfect table setting, the most delicious and perhaps elaborate meal, adjusting every little detail until it is just so...and only when everything is perfectly in place, turning to the guests to enjoy their company.

There is a lot of joy to be taken in being a host or hostess and doing something gracious for your guests, but it should never compromise the time we have to really enjoy our contact with them, especially when it starts to feel like 'work' as Martha clearly expresses. Jesus' friend Martha is so busy "serving" she completely forgets whom she is serving.

Friday night we were invited to my son's house to celebrate his 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday. He and his wife worked hard to provide a delightful dinner. We had a wonderful time being with each other and sharing what we loved about him on his special day. We could have had beanie weenies and still had a great time. What mattered most were the words we shared and that he heard.

Frustrated at her sister Mary's inactivity, Martha is so wrapped up in her own agenda that she plants herself in front of Jesus and demands that he do something about her sister. Martha is hosting the Messiah; the gospel is being proclaimed in her living room and she complains to the "Lord" that she is doing all the work herself, and couldn't Jesus please get Mary up from the ground at his feet and lend a hand.

No wonder Jesus describes Martha as being in an "uproar," disturbed and distracted. Jesus is gently reminding his hostess that "hospitality" is about more about room in your heart than how clean are the rooms in your house.

While Martha was busy being distracted, Mary was busy being instructed. Mary sat at Jesus' feet. She listened to every word he spoke. She attended fully to his words. Martha admitted and welcomed guests into her home. Mary admitted and welcomed the word of the Lord into her heart.

I think that one of the things Jesus is praising in Mary's behavior is her careful listening and just being present with her guests. Jesus is telling us that there is great wisdom in letting the dishes soak in the sink so we can let his words soak in our spirits.

Max Lucado is right on target when he writes: "Every church needs a Martha. Change that. Every church needs a lot of Marthas with sleeves rolled up and ready, they keep the pace for the church. Because of Marthas the church budgets get balanced church buildings get repaired and babies get bounced on loving knees in the nursery. You don't appreciate Marthas until a Martha is missing and all the Marys of the church start scrambling to find the keys to lock doors, turn off the lights and turn off the air conditioning.

Martha was a live wire to be sure. However, even live wires need a time out for recharging. Work without worship will soon burn you out. Even in church we can lose our sense of perspective.” 1

I think worship without work is problematic as well. There needs to be a balance. There is a time for everything. It's like breathing.....inhaling and exhaling are both highly recommended. To only inhale is to hyperventilate. To only exhale is to suffocate. It's not an either or, it's a both and.

Yesterday Keep Baytown Beautiful worked hard. Representatives from churches all over Baytown, including ours, gathered to collect and recycle things that people no longer needed. Today, many of those same people are sitting in worship. I would have loved to have been helping yesterday, but Mike Floyd and Judy Gunn and I were called to spend a beautiful day inside...inside a beautiful sanctuary in Orange, Texas for a presbytery meeting.

Today, we have a lot of well-meaning, well-planning, well-organized Marthas. . . Whatever we strategize, whatever long-range plans or short-term project we energize, whatever goals we are going for — we need to always keep first and foremost the reason for the church's existence —to hear and share the words and love of Jesus.

Martha was hurrying around doing those little things that are so important to for entertaining guests in her home, and Jesus appreciated her efforts. But Martha had forgotten the better part. Mary understood that intuitively.

As disciples of Jesus we are to continually do acts of love and charity, but we do so not to earn our salvation but to give expression to it. Being a disciple of Jesus is about keeping commandments, but we keep the commandments because we love the commander.

I don't believe for a moment that Jesus loved Mary more than Martha, nor did he treasure Mary's devotion more than Martha's dessert. Jesus was not denigrating Martha's role as the one entertaining. He was simply saying that there is a time and a place for everything, and right now he needed them to focus on his mission from the Father.

This was an important time in Jesus' ministry. He knew something that Martha did not. He knew his time with them was short. There wouldn't be many more opportunities for them to be together. And so, with love in his eyes and a tender smile on his lips, Jesus said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, the better part, and it will not be taken away from her."

I imagine that Martha let the dishes soak and sat down with Mary to listen. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of John when Martha and Mary's brother Lazarus had died and

Jesus came 4 days after the funeral, Mary was inside and it was Martha who came out and greeted Jesus. It was Martha that had the faith to confront Jesus with her belief that if Jesus had been there her brother wouldn't have died. It was Martha who knew enough to say that she believed that her brother would rise again in the resurrection on the last day. When Jesus said to her "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Martha said, "Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God the one coming into the world." Martha had listened.

There is nothing wrong with hard work as long as it does not stand in the way of close relationships with other people and with God. I LOVE our Marthas! This last Thursday night Our Member Care committee put on such a love feast for the family of Dee Rushing Lay following her memorial service. I am so grateful for our Marthas. All I know how to make is tuna salad and PBJ's. I am so grateful to see them in the sanctuary this morning as well.

I love our Marthas. Baytown is more Beautiful because of their work yesterday.

I love our Marys. Our worship yesterday in First Presbyterian Orange was beautifully led by six pastors who told of their experiences as women being ordained as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

Gordon Dahl in his book Work, Play, and Worship in a Leisure Oriented Society is quoted as saying that "most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship. As a result, their meanings and values are distorted. Their relationships disintegrate faster than they can keep them in repair and their lifestyles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot." 2

There is more truth to that than we would like to admit. Worship is an essential part of a well balanced life. Regular worship produces satisfying lives. Regular worship produces healthier families. People who worship regularly live longer.

Many of you are very busy people. You're busy in the community. You're busy at your job. You're busy at church. . But have you found that one thing that is needed, that one thing that will transform you and give you a peace that surpasses understanding? Take a clue from Martha's sister Mary. The most important thing you can do is to take a few moments each day and spend it in prayer and meditation and scripture. Take time to hear God speak to you through his Holy Spirit as you read God's word. Sense God's guiding hand as you seek to do God's will so that God's kingdom will come, and God's will, will be done on earth as it is being done in heaven.

Writer Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day," he recalled in his book Stress Fractures. "Before long, things around our home started reflecting the pattern of my hurry-up style. It was becoming unbearable.

"I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, 'Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast.'

"Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, 'Honey, you can tell me and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.'" "I'll never forget her answer: 'Then listen slowly.'" 3

Let the dishes soak. Let Jesus' words soak in. Keep on priorities C and B but don't neglect Priority A... Don't forget the 1 thing. Don't neglect ... the better part.

Let's pray. O God, often we are quick to complain about all that we have to do, and forget that we should be thankful for every opportunity to serve you. Teach us to take time to sit at your feet and learn the lessons that will enable us to do the work with grateful hearts.

Patient God, we need to learn from you. We get caught up in busy activity, hoping people will notice how hard we are working, but we forget that what we need most is to wait patiently for your Word. In this time of worship, Lord, we sit at your feet, waiting patiently for your Word that will enlighten our path and lighten our burden. Hear now the prayers of your people as we mention by name those people and concerns on our hearts.

We pray for the family of Dee Rushing Lay who was killed in an automobile accident.

We pray for the survivors and the families of those who were killed by the attack in Nice, France.

We pray for survivors and families of those wounded and of those that were killed in the shooting of the police officers in Dallas, and the families of Alton Sterling and Philandro Castille.

We pray for the Republican Convention in Cleveland this week. We are aware and concerned about the potential for violence. We pray that cooler heads may prevail.

1 A Gentle Thunder, Word Publishing, 1995, page 127, by Max Lucado

2 Work, Play, and Worship in a Leisure Oriented Society Gordon Dahl

3 Bits & Pieces, June 24, 1993, Page 13-14