

Proper 11, St. John's Olney, 21 July 2019

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Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

S.D.G.

I hope that some of you remember, as I do, the movie *City Slickers*. Ultimately the movie is about three middle aged men who go to great lengths, including running with the bulls in Spain, and a cattle drive out west, all to figure out what is important in their lives. For me the memorable part of the movie was Curly, the character played by Jack Palance. Curly was a crusty old cowboy, a man of few words. He told Billy Crystal that the meaning of life was one thing. As he held up his index finger to emphasize the one thing, he said this one thing was all that was important, it was the meaning of life.

Billy Crystal's character of course wanted to know what that one thing was, to which Curly said "that is what you have to figure out." Curly died before they could talk about it again. So what is that one thing?

The prophet Amos certainly has an answer in mind. When shown a basket of summer fruit, or at least when he sees one in a vision, the Lord tells Amos that "The end has come for my people."

The Hebrew Scriptures often needs annotations, especially because so much is lost in the translation from Hebrew to English. The word for summer fruit and the word for end, as in "The end has come for my people" have the same sound. It is a word play and why one translation says "the time is ripe for my people."

Summer fruit is a time for celebration, a time to enjoy the harvest. When considering this word play this celebration actually marks the end of God's people, it marks a time when temple songs become wailings.

Amos is calling out a warning; *"Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying '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 warning is for those who have elevated the shekel above the needy, it is for those who *"practice deceit with false balances"*; they are using scales whose inaccuracy favors the merchant and causes hardship on others.

These people are observing the Sabbath to give the appearance of piety and faith, but are just biding their time until they can again cheat others.

When I was working at a manufacturing firm in Lancaster, many years ago, I oversaw the purchase of hundreds of thousands of dollars of corrugated cartons. I quickly learned what made a good carton, and learned where the less scrupulous companies cut corners to save money. We had one vendor who continually produced cartons that were measurably better than anyone else. I was touring their facility one day and came to a part of the loading dock that was devoted to recycling the paper waste. Even this part of the factory was neat and orderly. Their vice president told me a story, she said that an industry trade group had recently toured their facility, when they looked at the recycling area one person kept looking around. When asked, he said that he was looking for the water hose. It seems that this other company routinely soaked their paper waste with water so that it would weigh more when taken to the recycling center, and thus fetch a higher, and unfair, price. This other company practiced deceit with false balances. The other company was not one of our vendors.

Amos is warning that terrible things are about to happen; and the worst of these is that they will no longer find the word of God. *“They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”*

The one thing they need, the one thing that brings meaning to their life, the word of the Lord will no longer be within their reach.

For Saint Luke there is also one thing that is important. To be fair, if you read three commentaries on this passage from Saint Luke, the story of Mary and Martha, you will find at least three, if not more, suggestions on what Luke is actually saying. Scholars and theologians have not reached a consensus on the implications of this passage. An often shared view is that Mary has chosen the contemplative life and Martha is distracted with worldly busyness; but that is not consistent with the other stories of Mary and Martha; and that view assumes a black and white, either / or, world. Saint John depicts Mary and Martha both serving in complementary roles, so this interpretation of Luke creates a dichotomy that does not exist. The word used for service in this passage, *“diakonia”*, is used to refer to both preaching and serving at the Eucharistic table. In practice and in tradition, service of the word and service of the

table are not hierarchical, nor are they separated, they are very much integrated with each other.

We need the contemplative life as much as we need action. It is often preached that we need both Marys and Marthas in our lives, or that we have both Mary and Martha within each of us. Pope Francis has said, and I paraphrase, “Pray for the homeless and the hungry, then give them a meal, for that is how prayer works.”

Another view of this interchange with Mary and Martha is that Mary has broken the boundaries of educational convention by sitting at the feet of Jesus as a disciple would sit. She is not looking up at Jesus with puppy dog eyes, she is looking up to learn from her teacher. She is learning as others have learned, and Jesus implies that Martha can join Mary in becoming a disciple - a woman disciple. This view is more consistent with the view of scripture and Jesus turning common conventions upside down.

Until we are seated at the heavenly banquet and find ourselves at a place next to Saint Luke we will not truly know the nuances of this passage. But we can see the one thing that Saint Luke sees as important – the word of the Lord. Jesus was invited into the home of Mary and Martha and it was there that he shared the word of the Lord. He shared the one thing that is important.

The word of the Lord is quite clear, we are to love the Lord our God with all that we are and all that have, and we are to love our neighbor. That is the one thing that is important.

That is what has been lost sight of in our land and around the world. God is still speaking, but those who need to hear fail to listen. The word of the Lord is absent from those who trample on the needy or bring to ruin the poor of the land. The word of the Lord is absent from so many who are in power.

Those here who are participating in our adult Forum are reading the book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* by Eugene Peterson. This is a study on being a disciple, and a reflection on a series of fifteen psalms that were often used for training disciples or accompanying a pilgrimage journey. Psalm 123 is a part of this series, and this psalm reminds us that like servants, we are watching and waiting. We are watching and waiting for the word of the Lord.

*I look to you, heaven-dwelling God,
look up to you for help.
Like servants, alert to their master's commands,
like a maiden attending her lady,
We're watching and waiting, holding our breath,
awaiting your word of mercy.
Mercy, God, mercy!
We've been kicked around long enough,
Kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men,
kicked when we're down by arrogant brutes. (Ps 123 Msg)*

As we watch and wait we continue to prayer and then to act. We pray for the hungry, and then offer them a meal. We pray for the homeless, and then offer them shelter. We pray for the persecuted or the refugee and then offer them hospitality. We pray for those who can not hear the word of the Lord, and then we speak out in God's name.

The meaning of life comes from one thing, there is one thing that is important. It is up to us to find that one thing.

Amen,