

July 18, 2010 (8:00 am); Proper 11C
Amos 8:1-12; Ps 52
Col 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

Rev. Deborah Meister

Reading the paper these days is an experience of strange juxtapositions. Articles about unemployment nestle against ads for \$400 shoes. Photographs of rubble in Haiti decorate pages with reviews of expensive technological gadgets. Stories of priestly sexual abuse or corporate malfeasance vie for attention with lifestyle pieces about yoga and exotic new diets. The options are stark: rich or poor, evil or holy, obesity or fanatic exercise. We have become, it seems, a culture of extremes.

Biblical times were no different. Today's readings give us portraits of three of our own qualities: profit-making, spirituality, and public service, each taken to an extreme. Each of these portraits shows us a life out of balance, people who have chosen one aspect of a healthy life to the exclusion of others.

The prophet Amos comes roaring in to castigate the people of Israel for their out-of-control obsession with making money. Listen to how Eugene Peterson translates this passage: "Listen to this, you who walk all over the weak, you who treat poor people as less than nothing, Who say, "When's my next paycheck coming so I can go out and live it up? How long till the weekend when I can go out and have a good time?" (Amos 8:4-5, *The Message*) It's a striking image of people who only want to party, never to work - - but, ironically, Peterson, who is usually an excellent and careful translator, reverses the prophet's point. The people of Israel are not partiers, but workaholics. When Amos refers to "the new moon" and "the sabbath," he is talking about the major religious festivals, times when God's people were given the luxury of rest. But the Hebrews of his time did not want to rest; they wanted to make money. They were like people who spend Christmas planning their next advertising campaign, and who skip Thanksgiving dinner at grandma's house to meet with clients. They'd spend their time checking e-mail rather than playing with their children, and would skip church on Sundays to attend a good sale.

Worse, they don't care how they make their money -- which means, they don't care whom they hurt. They cheat their customers and exploit their laborers. These are the sorts of men who would sell people mortgages they could not afford, and off-shore their production in order to avoid safety regulations which might protect the workers they are paying five dollars a day. They have taken their natural desire for financial security and made it the totalizing force in their life -- and so God threatens to take away from them everything which they have despised -- family, friends, joyful and sacred time. "I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation," warns the Lord. (Amos 8: 10) Then they will seek the Lord, but they will not find him, because when you close your ears to the words of God long enough, it can be hard to learn how to hear them. "Remember your God in the day of your youth," warns the author of Ecclesiastes, "before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near in which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" (Eccles 12:1) The habits of a lifetime have a firm hold upon the soul, and it is easier to repent today than it will be tomorrow.

The other two portraits are less overtly frightening, but they are, nonetheless, worth attending. Mary and Martha are often depicted as the two sides of the spiritual life, the contemplative and the active -- but neither way of being is fully spiritual alone. Martha is a doer. When Jesus and his disciples arrive at her house, she throws herself into the preparations: making food, cleaning dishes, serving drinks, washing pots; she probably even lets the neighbors know that they should come and hear the new teacher in town, even though it will make more work for her. She does what is necessary to care for those around her: to feed them, house them, and give them comfort. If she were living today, she'd be out there volunteering at Elijah's Promise, helping run the Food Pantry, and spending every other weekend hammering in nails at Habitat for Humanity. She would organize the neighborhood, serve on the community association and the school board, and advocate for the environment -- and she would resent like heck all the people who were content to sit in front of the television and remain indifferent to her causes. "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" she bursts out. (Luke 10: 40) How many times have we heard this kind of comment from outreach and advocacy workers who are trying to guilt-trip us into helping? How many times have we said those words ourselves, when we were cooking a family dinner or organizing for a political candidate or working late while our colleagues went home? Do you not care?

This is a difficult scene to read, because the truth is that we need *more* people to care about the troubles of the world, not fewer. Without the Marthas among us, the poor would be hungrier, the sick in greater pain, the lonely unvisited. But there is a way of caring for the great causes which leads one to despise one's neighbors rather than to love them. There are people who do so much that they burn out, become cranky or resentful, or put themselves on a pedestal. Martha is a person who thinks only of the needs of others, but has lost the art of loving herself as a creature of God. She does not do what it would take to be renewed, and so she begrudges others the time she gives them. With her hands and her feet, she loves, but in her heart, she is learning to hate.

Mary, of course, is at the other end of the spectrum. While Martha bustles around the kitchen, Mary sits quietly at the feet of Jesus, listening to him and hanging upon his words. She is a woman who knows how to tend her own soul; if she were alive today, she would wake up every day before dawn to read Scripture, go on retreats and pilgrimages, attend Womenspirit or the Men's Ministry, lead the adult forum. She would take up yoga, eat a vegan diet, and spend large amounts of money on recordings of chant and healing herbs. She would lead a blameless life -- Jesus even praises her, saying: "Mary has chosen the better part." (Luke 10:42)

But it is the better part *only* if it not the only part. A spirituality which centers on making my soul perfect, my life blameless, can easily overlook the fact that God commanded us to care for our neighbors as well as ourselves. If a person attends Eucharist five times a week, but walks past the hungry child on the street, then she has not connected the food she receives at the altar with the food we all need to live. And if a man spends all his free time doing yoga and meditation, but gets angry every time his child interrupts to demand his attention, then his practice is bringing him no closer to God. Mary's part is the better part for an hour or a week, but if our attempts to be close to God do not bring us closer to other people, they are failures. Just as we are not called to serve others to the extent that we neglect our own soul, neither is it possible to knock at God's door alone: we need the company of those we have blessed in order to arrive there.

Three ways, three extremes. Each of these is a necessary part of a human life -- work, prayer, and service -- but none can be taken alone. The word "heresy," after all, means "choice"; to be a heretic is chose a part of the truth and prefer it over the whole. We are heretics when we nurture part of our humanity, but allow the rest to wither.

The call of Christ is to balance and integration. Listen to the words of the letter to the Colossians: "in Christ all things hold together...so that he might come to have a place in everything." (Col 1: 17-18) Christ demands all of our lives -- our work, our love of what is highest and best, and our love of others -- for only in Christ can each come to full fruition. For Christ was perfect man: humankind made visible, not as we show ourselves forth in our lives, piecemeal, a tangle of competing urges, alienated from others and from ourselves, but whole, all our impulses in harmony together. The Christ who worked long hours to heal and to teach is the same Christ who took time to pray alone; the man who studied Scripture and conversed with his Father is the same man who fed the hungry and was kind to the poor. The man who loved children and took them in his arms, who feasted with his disciples and gloried in the beauty of the lilies, is the same one who laid down the life he loved so much when that was the call of God. He is our nature and our destiny, and our call is to be made "mature" in him. (Col 1:28)

This day, every day, seek a little farther. This day, every day, ask for grace. Ask for grace to practice the things you love, and ask for grace to love the areas where you struggle. When we sit together in these pews, we are Martha and Mary, rich and poor, businessman and mother and nurse and father. We are old and young, black and white and brown, from near and from far away. We are the body of Christ, all assembled together, and we have the gifts we need to learn from one another. Not to learn how to be one another, but to learn how to be ourselves, whole and shining, just as God intended us to be. For Christ is the image of the invisible God, and so is the church, you and me together, as long as Christ is among us, "established and steadfast in faith." (Cold 1:23) Amen.