

## Amos 8:1-12

This is what the Lord God showed me—a basket of summer fruit. He said, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A basket of summer fruit." Then the Lord said to me, "The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. The songs of the temple shall become wailings on that day," says the Lord God; "the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!"

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? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, 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."

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it, and all of it rise like the Nile, and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?

On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day.

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.

## Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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."

## Sermon: Listening With The Heart

Last week I centered my sermon on a quote from Thomas Merton

In the progress toward religious understanding, one does not go from answer to answer but from question to question. One's questions are answered, not by clear, definitive answers, but by more pertinent and more crucial questions.

Thomas Merton

With that in mind I approached this week's Gospel lesson wondering what questions it might raise to the reader, how might it lead us to more pertinent and more crucial questions in our religious understanding.

It's a short story, let me read it again:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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."

Before I moved to New Milford I was working at a Theological Seminary and heard a wonderful sermon on this passage. It was by the professor of New Testament, the first woman professor in the two hundred year history of the school. At that time, over half the students were women, so it's not surprising that one question she addressed was what does this story tell us about the role of women in the church?

She said:

I love this story about Mary and Martha - partly, I guess, because I have sisters, and what happens between these two sounds so familiar. Martha's the eldest and the mistress of the house. She's invited Jesus over for supper and, as we pick up the story, she's begun making the meal. But her sister, rather than helping in the kitchen, sits in the living room with Jesus and his disciples. Not only does Mary stick her sister with all the household chores while she talks to the company, but she's really being grossly inappropriate to be sitting in there at all. No self respecting woman of the first century ought to intrude on the theological conversations of men. If her father had been alive, he would have shoved her into the kitchen, because, as Rabbi Eliezar said, "It is better that a man should burn the words of the Torah than that he should teach them to his daughter." It is not acceptable in first century Judaism that women should discuss theology with men.

So here's Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet with all the other disciples, and Martha's fuming out in the kitchen. They're wealthy women (they own a household) and there are plenty of servants around to do the actual work, but it's the principle of the thing. Mary's not only left the entire responsibility for a big dinner party to her sister, but she's embarrassing Martha as well.

Finally, Martha can stand it no longer, and she goes in to Jesus. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone?" And Jesus answers her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled over many things - but one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken from her."

I suppose the words of Jesus are not so shocking to us now, since it is the tenor of our times to tear down the social barriers that confine women to certain kinds of work while reserving others strictly for men. But we should not underestimate how liberating this notion would have been in the time of Jesus and even in our time if you were to travel to certain parts of the world.

There are times, I suppose, that such freedom is overwhelming. Some of us might wish we had traditional roles we could comfortably settle into because it seems like we have too many choices, too

many responsibilities, too many tasks on the to-do list. And in that way we could probably better identify with Martha than with Mary

Jesus says to Martha Jesus says to Martha: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled over many things." The word for anxious that Jesus uses here can also be translated as torn in pieces, divided, fragmented, distracted, pulled apart in different directions. Would that be a good description of our lives - How often do we find ourselves pulled apart in different directions?

We need to work, but we need to play; we need to take care of families, but we need to take care of ourselves, too; we need to keep spouses, parents, children, all happy at the same time, and they all need something different. For the rest of our lives we will constantly be juggling needs - our own and those of people we're close to. And often those conflicting needs will make us anxious, pulled apart in different directions.

Martha, Martha, Jesus says, you are anxious and troubled over many things - but one thing is needful. So the more pertinent and more crucial question is raised – what is that one thing?

I can tell you what the professor said in her sermon, she said it was to be human. She said: Only one thing is needful - to be met and known and forgiven and healed and loved. Only one thing is needful - to be human before God so that for God's sake we can be human with one another.

Isn't this easy, doesn't being human come naturally to us? In his book Shoes of the Fisherman Morris West wrote "It takes so much to be a human being, that there are very few who have the enlightenment and the courage to pay the price for that. One has to abandon altogether the search for security and reach out for the risk of living with both arms. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing. One needs a will which is stubborn in conflict, but apt always to total acceptance of every circumstance of living and of dying."

How do we break out of those times when we are less than human – when we keep the world at arm's length, bury our fears, stifle our dreams, judge and feel judged, and work hard to never let a moment of stillness or reflection creep in.

Perhaps, at those times this story of Martha and Mary can come to our aid – can help us find the more pertinent and crucial questions that lead to deeper understanding.

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. 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."