

8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 18, 2010

Proper 11C: Amos 8:1-12; Ps. 52; Col. 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

MARTHA AND JESUS

We've heard very interesting readings from scripture this morning. The one from Amos sounded, at times, as if it could have been written quite recently, sometime since the beginning of the current financial crisis. But Peggy Moore preached from Amos last Sunday – a passage that's continuous with today's – and that leaves me free to look at another one of our readings. For those of you who missed that really excellent sermon, you'll find that it's already on the Good Shepherd website. I recommend it to you.

But I'm going to turn to the story from Luke's gospel. We usually call it "the story of Mary and Martha," don't we? But that's sort of odd. We meet *Martha* first. Mary never says a word. The interaction is between Martha and Jesus; Mary's just a bit player.

Maybe that's why people have made so much of her. She's a blank slate on which you can project whatever you want. Maybe she's a pure, pale, saintly nun, dedicated to silence and contemplation. (Don't laugh. That's exactly what she got turned into for centuries to prove the superiority of contemplative religious orders over more "active" forms of religious life.) Or maybe she's the younger child who loves words and is constantly getting caught out for reading when she was supposed to be taking out the garbage. (That's probably my own, youngest-child scenario.) Or maybe she's a proto-feminist, asserting her right to learn along with the men, while her sister is a repressive, unenlightened figure trying to force her back into the kitchen. (That one was popular a few decades back and still has some resonance.)

Then again, maybe you *don't* like Mary. Maybe you feel Martha has a point here. That's okay – you can still project what you like onto her. Maybe she's the dreamy type who can't pay attention to the real world for more than two minutes. Maybe she's a congenital shirker who expects others to do the cooking and washing up. Maybe somebody else in the family pampered her and made a pet of her and now *you're* stuck with the consequences. Yes, Mary makes a great blank slate.

But, as I was saying, I don't think this is really the story of Mary and Martha. It's the story of Martha and Jesus. It's *Martha* who invites Jesus into her home. It's Martha who's taking on the duties of host. And that wasn't a risk-free undertaking. There are other stories in the gospels about people inviting Jesus to dinner, and they often wind up in some kind of

confrontation with him. Remember the story of Jesus at dinner in the Pharisees' house, where the "sinful woman" washes his feet? (Luke 7:36-8:3) We heard that one read about a month ago. The Pharisee got quite a talking to on that occasion. So this time it's Martha's turn.

Let's look at what's going in between her and Jesus here. He's not treating her lightly or dismissively. I'm quite sure of that. Let me tell you why. It has to do with the way he addresses her, using her name twice: "Martha! Martha!" That's very unusual in the gospels.

Now, you can perform that line a lot of different ways, can't you? With rolling of the eyes With exasperation. . . . With derision. . . . But Luke uses this doubling of the name in none of these ways in his writings. Instead, he has Jesus use it just two other times, both of them in critical situations. Jesus uses it to pull the person he's addressing in close, as it were, because he has something really important to say to them.

The first of these occasions is at the Last Supper. Jesus says to Peter:

Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (Luke 22:31-32)

Simon *doesn't* listen, of course; instead, he gets all huffy: "Lord, I'm ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Jesus responds to that by predicting his betrayal.

The second occasion comes quite a while after the Resurrection and Ascension, when the Risen Jesus knocks Paul (or Saul, as he was then calling himself) down on the road to Damascus. And he says to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4) Paul knows he's in deep trouble. After all, he's just been struck blind and knocked into the dirt. But apart from that, he hasn't a clue. So his response is, "Who are you?"

What do we get from all this? Jesus isn't dismissing Martha or making fun of her. He's taking her with all the seriousness that he gave to Peter or to Paul. He's asking her to focus her attention on him – very closely. He's about to tell her something of immense importance, which she probably won't understand at first.

Part of what he has to tell her is fairly obvious. Luke has already told us that she "was distracted by her many tasks." Jesus fleshes that out a bit: "You're worried and you're disturbed by all these things you're doing at once." And then he tells her the antidote: "There is need of only one thing."

What on earth does he mean? At one level, he may just be saying, "Serve us the simplest supper you can. We're not here for fine dining. We're here to see you and talk with you." At a

deeper level, he's not just addressing the present moment, but Martha's whole way of being in the world: "Martha!" he's saying, "Martha, figure out what's really important for you and stick with that. Don't make everything important. You don't have to be Martha Stewart. Shed those self-imposed requirements that are driving you to distraction and find what's central. Did you invite me here just to make yourself nuts? Is that how you live your life?"

"Martha! Martha!" Jesus wouldn't have wasted his breath summoning her into so intense an engagement for anything less than a life-changing purpose. And the likelihood, of course, is that she didn't get it – not right then anyway. She didn't get it any more than Peter did. He had to go ahead and fulfill Jesus's prediction by denying him three times. Or any more than Paul, who, after all, was convinced that he'd been doing God's will by being a persecutor. He had to work on that problem for years before he became the famous and controversial missionary that we know him as.

But later on, as Martha reflected on how such a promising event had gone so wrong, what did she come up with? I suppose she started off being grumpy about the good part having been taken from her and given to her useless little sister. Then, at some point, she must have realized that wasn't how it happened. Nobody took it from her. She dropped it on the floor so she could get on with her agenda. Mary just came along and picked it up.

It happens. It happens all the time. All of us Marthas do it. Our own *virtues* get in our way and blind us: Martha's supreme competence, Peter's fierce but very fallible devotion, Paul's somewhat fanatical faith. Competence, devotion, faith – all good things – but not the one thing necessary.

The one thing necessary is to notice when God is among us, to recognize a gift when it's given us, to treasure the riches of grace that surround us – in our families, our friends, our church, our world – and to be present with them when the opportunity offers, to breathe in the Spirit that lets everything else fall into place, to grasp what's really central in life, at least for a moment.

Why is this so important? Well, it's what makes us human. It's what makes us loving. It's what connects us with God and ourselves and one another. That's not so shabby, is it? It sure beats being distracted, anxious, troubled, and angry.

So listen up, all you Marthas!

Yeah, me too.