

## FAMINE RELIEF

Sermon, July 25, 2010

Texts: Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42

Earlier in this chapter from Luke we read of Jesus' affirmation of the expert in the law, who, when asked by Jesus, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it? How do you understand it?" He responded, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." "Right!" Jesus said. "Do this, and you will live!"

As pointed out last week, Jesus was not giving a sardonic reply to some testy, pesky lawyer; He was giving an enthusiastic reply of affirmation to a man who gave a really good answer. Jesus reply, "Do this and you will live!" could be paraphrased, "Keep on doing this, and you will come alive!" In Matthew 22:37, Jesus said in another context: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and Prophets." According to Jesus, this is the summary of the whole Law. Two things to note here: First, the commandment to love God comes *before* the commandment to love our neighbors. Second, according to Jesus, the two great commandments are "like" one another, but they are not one and the same. Obeying one does not exclude the necessity of obeying the other. Trust me on this, but years of pastoral ministry have confirmed for me that if we don't follow the first commandment first, two things are certain: (1) We will make a mess of things, and (2) we will help and/or cause others to do the same. If we do not love God first and foremost, we will not love our neighbors ... nor our children, nor our co-workers ...well.

We read that Jesus "... came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to Him." As Jesus began to teach, Mary, one of the sisters who lived in the home, sat at His feet and absorbed every word. But the other sister, Martha, the one who greeted Jesus at the door, was busily at work while Mary sat there listening to Jesus. I can imagine Martha in the kitchen banging the pots a little more loudly than necessary as she fumed over her sister Mary's lack of help. Finally, she just couldn't take it any more, so she storms into the room and bellows. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

Typically when someone refers to this passage, we hear criticism of Martha, as if to say, "Martha just doesn't get it. Mary knows what's important." But I'm not so sure. I think Martha has been listening all along to some of Jesus' clear teaching about service, about the practical need to exercise hands-on love and obedience in action. Remember the context of this passage. This follows Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, where He affirms hands-on helping of those in need. Earlier in this same chapter, Luke 10:2, Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the *laborers* are few." In other places Jesus said things like, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not *do* the things I tell you?" No, Jesus wants and desires service; hands-on, practical, doing-something service. The last thing He is going to tell any Martha is to stop serving. But He does give her a gentle reminder of what not to neglect.

Now, some of us relate easily to Mary who loved to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen while He talked. Others of us, perhaps most of us, relate better to Martha who preferred to work for Jesus while all the talking was going on. But they are both necessary. In a sense, there is a Mary and a Martha living within each of us. One of them may be more dominant than the other, but that only means that you have to nurture the other part of you. For both Mary and Martha are necessary to a healthy soul. We must love God and give attention to Him, *and* we must get busy serving Him and loving our neighbor. No, Jesus isn't condemning Marthas. Rather, it is out of concern for those who have obeyed the call to work and serve that He reminds Marthas of the importance of attending to the Mary-like part of their souls. That's the part that knows how to sit at Jesus feet, that's the part that wants to nurture the relationship that gives you the reason and direction for the service and activity in the first place. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her."

The better part ... that's what we Marthas can lose sight of. Life has so many parts, doesn't it? There is the part about our responsibility at home to people who are counting on us, who depend on us. There is the part about our responsibility at work, at church, at civic associations. There is the part about our responsibility to friends, to our aging friends or our aging parents, to our children and grandchildren, and there is the part about being an informed citizen and a responsible voter. There is the part about our responsibility to care for ourselves through exercise and diet and health care. Sometimes it seems like we keep accumulating more and more parts to life, more and more responsibilities, and the pieces of our pie keep getting sliced smaller and smaller, which permit less and less time with all of them. And you know what happens ... before long we don't feel like we are doing a very good job at any of these particular parts. That is when we start to burn out. And that is when we tend to get prickly with others ... starting at home, like with our sisters. And that is when Jesus ever-so-tenderly says, "Martha, Martha. Keep your focus on the better part." To attend to the better part of your life is to take time to join Mary at Jesus' feet where your soul is nurtured. It is to make certain that your spirit is not being subjected to a famine. Your spirit needs to be properly fed and nourished, your spirit needs to take time to sit and listen to Jesus. This is to honor the first great commandment. As we come again and again to the feet of Jesus, day by day, week by week, year by year, all the parts of our lives become more united, more integrated, more "balanced" around the "hub" of the one Savior for it all. And as a result, we have more motivation, more strength and energy and direction for everything else we do to love our neighbor.

In the message of judgment we read from the prophet Amos, we see the extreme of what can happen when the people of God fail to choose the better part, when God no longer has any part of our attention, and our work and our drive for success completely take over. At the time of this prophecy, Israel is experiencing a rare period of prosperity and peace that will end before too long when Assyria conquers the land and takes the people into exile. Rather than a time of blessing, this period of prosperity has become a time of great corruption. As displayed in the imagery of ripe summer fruit ... it looks great, but it doesn't take long for summer fruit to turn rotten ... what appears prosperous in the land is about to be exposed as rotten. The wealthy are exploiting the poor, justice has become a sham. God declares through Amos, "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and do away with the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so we may sell grain; and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat? --- skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings [off the floor] with the wheat?' Paraphrased, that means, 'When will these worship services be over with so we can get back to making money any which way we can?'" These people to whom Amos is preaching seemed to have stopped listening to God. They still maintain the show of worship, observing the holy days of the new moon and the Sabbath, but their worship is empty. Rather than using these holy occasions to nourish their spirits, they just want to get through them so they can go back to their oppressive businesses of buying and selling. Work and the wealth it can bring can indeed become oppressive. And in Israel's case, it eventually brought about her downfall. They were no longer honest, they were no longer honorable, they cheated the gullible, they took advantage of the poor, mainly because they had neglected and forgotten God and His ways. God warns them through Amos that they will pay a steep price. They have stopped listening to God, so God tells them He will take His word from them and they will no longer be able to find it; there will be a *famine* of God's word. They will no longer hear the good and comforting and instructive and true and *nourishing* words of God. What imagery ... a famine of God's word, the only true and lasting nourishment for our souls, our spirits, our hearts. That's what we experience when we stop listening to God, when we stop "loving the Lord God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind."

"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her." As Jesus reminds Martha, we must keep our souls fed and nourished. That doesn't mean to stop doing everything else; we all have responsibilities. We can't just let everything go without consequences to ourselves, our family, our co-workers, and our community. "To attend to the better part" is to join Mary at Jesus' feet and find famine relief for our souls. It is to honor the first great commandment. And as we do so, we find we have more motivation, more direction, more strength and energy for everything else.

Take time to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind ... and then, with nourished souls, get to work loving your neighbor as yourself.