

Serving or sitting?

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

I'd like to start this message with not one, but two personal confessions. The first is this: I am a recovering burned-out workaholic minister and social justice warrior. Just to give you an example, in seminary I served the congregation as the Peace and Justice Intern for two years, plus I spent summers doing interfaith advocacy work in Washington D.C. and hurricane recovery work in Nicaragua. Plus, I served as the chairperson for Seminarians for Social Change and was moderator of the student government. And I worked in the cafeteria and the bookstore and the library. And I marched against every social injustice that broke my heart. The death penalty, police brutality, U.S. foreign policy – you name the cause, I was fighting for it or against it – depending on the case – until I couldn't.

The signs of my burnout were there all along. In fact, in seminary, I was taking a course called *Pastoral, Theological and Ethical Issues in Death and Dying* and part of our final project was to write our funeral service. I actually included this hymn in my funeral service: “Lord I keep so busy working for the kingdom, keep so busy working for the kingdom, keep so busy working for the kingdom, ain't got time to die.” That was actually in my funeral service: ain't got time to die. I kind of wonder why nobody said, “Hey, you're on the trajectory to burnout.” It was there, the signs were there. I've had several mini burnouts throughout my career in congregational ministry, community organizing and healthcare chaplaincy, and then I had my one big burnout.

So, that's confession number one: I'm a recovering burned-out workaholic minister and social justice warrior. The second confession is like the first: I struggle with this gospel text today. Martha and Mary. One reason I struggle with it is because it's so often used as a critique of woman's work. Really, it's used as a way to pit women in ministry against each other. Mary versus Martha. Of course, Martha is portrayed as the bitter whiner, and Mary is the wise sister who chooses to be still and sit at Jesus' feet, and thus gets a pass from Jesus. And I know that this passage, it can be seen as a great, liberating, empowering text for women as Jesus' commendation of Mary reveals that Jesus' disciples – that is, those who learn from him and study at his feet – are not limited to just men. In reality, though, Mary might have gotten a pass excusing her from women's work. Most women throughout history have not gotten such a pass from the church. Women who neglect their Martha duties are often seen as uppity. And they're still expected to bring a dish to the potluck, even after preaching a sermon and teaching adult Sunday School classes, while their male colleagues are not. That's a digression – I won't go into that.

I really struggle with the way this passage has been interpreted to say that it's one or the other. It's either Martha or it's Mary. It's either service versus sitting, duty versus devotion. Action versus contemplation. As if these things are mutually exclusive. You must choose one – and if in case you're wondering, Mary is the right choice. Be a Mary. At least that's the message that we've gotten.

Mary has chosen the better way. That's what Jesus is saying here. What does Jesus mean by that? Is Jesus saying that devotion and study is better than service? I've certainly heard that message in my childhood, in churches that say that church is about coming and worshipping and having a change of heart, but not about going out and serving in the world. I've certainly heard that devotion is the

primary thing, again, as long as the work got done...um, but I don't buy that that's what Jesus is saying here. Because he doesn't say that anywhere else in scripture.

Just prior to this passage in Luke was Jesus telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and if there ever was a parable about active service being more important than personal piety, it's that one! The Good Samaritan. Jesus ends that parable with the mandate to his disciples and to those gathered, "Go and do likewise." Show mercy. Care for your neighbour. Jesus' whole ministry was about service and servanthood. He fed the hungry. He healed the sick, on the Sabbath. He washed his disciples' feet. Later in this Gospel, Jesus says his disciples: "Who is greater? The one who sits at the table or the one who serves? Isn't it the one who sits at the table? But I'm among you as one who serves." So I think an interpretation of these few verses of Martha and Mary as one that prioritizes devotion over action is incorrect. Active service is essential to Jesus and to those of us who would follow him. Because there is real suffering in this world. There is real injustice.

Just look at the text from the prophet Amos this morning; that's a hard text to read. Where the prophet is offering a biting critique of a society where people serve their own interests. And those at the margins...Amos says that "The poor and the needy are trampled by those at the centre". Writer Eric Smith calls it a "Screw you, I've got my mentality", where people assume that God was blessing all of this because they were prosperous and happy. But in fact, God was damning it all. Amos uses an image of a basket of summer fruit. Which can be seen as a potent symbol of plenty and blessing, as Smith says. But in the Hebrew, is also a play on words, doubling as a reference to the end. What looks like prosperity is actually a rotting core, because that prosperity is not extended to all. The suffering and injustice was as in Jesus' time as it was in Amos' day just as real today. We can look around us and see inequality, we can see injustice, we can see suffering, and we can't sit still while the world suffers. Jesus didn't. And I don't think he's telling Martha to do that. I don't think we're expected to do that either.

What do we make of this text? Martha. You are worried and distracted by many things. Now, I recognize that I am reading this passage through the lens of my own burnout experience. But oh, I read this passage, and it stings. It's like pouring peroxide into your wound. The wounds of my soul. I know that I have been one to value busyness and productivity as ends in themselves. You are worried and distracted by many things. I imagine that this is something that many of you can relate to. Many of you are also worried and distracted by many things. By the suffering of the world around us, by all the work that needs to be done. Have we made our work, our service, an idol? Relying on our work to give us our value, our meaning, our fulfillment. You are worried and distracted by many things. It sounds like the potential for burnout to me.

I recently read a book, which I'm still trying to process. It's called *From Burned-Out to Beloved: Soul-Care for Wounded Healers*. I'm going to read you the fourth sentence of the book. It reads: "I felt guilty for taking time for myself in the face of so much injustice and poverty, and thought my passion for the work would carry me through." I read that, and gosh, it resonated with my soul and my experience. And I bet Martha could relate to that too. That we can't feel guilty taking time for self, because there's so much to do, and our passion for the work should be able to carry us through, we think. Maybe Jesus isn't saying that Mary's sitting is better than Martha's serving, but that each has their own place. And that we need to do the sitting so that we can be equipped for the serving. We start from a place of tending to our own souls, and *then* we go out and thrive in our work and in our service.

A mentor of mine, David Shiri, once preached a sermon on Sabbath. He noted that most interpretations of Sabbath – at least here in Protestant North American churches – is that we work, and then we rest, following God's example in Creation. God worked for six days, physically creating everything around us, and then God rested. Thus we should do likewise: we work and then we rest.

But my friend pointed out that humans weren't created until the sixth day. We humans were the pinnacle of Creation. We were created, and then night came, and then it was the Sabbath. So humans rested with God on the Sabbath. Then, on the eighth day, humans got busy with the work of naming the plants and animals, and living and working on earth. Yes, God worked then rested. God rested from work. But not humans. We hadn't done any work yet, according to Genesis. God may rest from work. But we – we work from rest. Before Jesus started his ministry, he went away on his own in the wilderness.

In a similar way, the book I had mentioned, *Burned Out to Beloved*, offers a path to healing and recovery that starts with rest, with stillness, with centering, with soul-care. Now, *soul-care* is different from what we call self-care, although self-care is also important. Much of what we find on the self-care inventory like “practice yoga, partake in a hobby, eat most evening meals with my family...” those often give our weary selves just one more item on our already-brimming to-do list. As if we have to add more to balance the busyness in our lives. And also a lot of these things that we call self-care...many of them are rooted in privilege. Self-care is important. But it's not the same thing as soul-care. Soul-care is about establishing our identity as whole and complete and beloved. It's embracing difficult inner work to examine how our beliefs and our perceptions inform and affect our work and our service. It's establishing boundaries to protect us, as well as rhythms and practices to sustain us. It's aligning our lives with our values. It's acknowledging our limits. And it's embracing the truth that *we cannot do it all*.

I think Mary is getting at that. That soul-care. The text says that she sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what Jesus was saying. She sat and she listened, and this, my friends, this is where action begins. In listening. In listening to Jesus, in listening to God, in listening to however you conceptualize the divine. It's listening to your own heartbeat. It's listening to your body. It's listening to the deepest, truest places in your own soul. It's listening to the wisdom of our elders. It's listening to the curiosity of listening to the cries of the world and to the earth herself. It's listening to the whispers of possibility that lie beyond both hope and despair.

Sacred activist Chelsea McMillan wrote the book *Purpose to the People: A Handbook for Radical Transformation* and this book is pretty much a manual to getting started in what she calls “sacred activism”. What she names is the first commitment to transformation – and this is a transformation of self and the world – that first commitment, before a commitment to community building, before a commitment to strategic action. Before even a commitment to connecting to purpose. The first commitment to transformation is the commitment to listen. To be open and fully receptive to what is emergent in the present moment, to face reality, to listen with clarity, both to what is and to what is possible.

I don't believe that Jesus was admonishing Martha for serving or for doing what some people might say are menial tasks. We know Jesus liked food, and we know Jesus valued hospitality. And as I have stated previously, Jesus was all about action and service. I don't think that Jesus was commending Mary for simply sitting. I think biblical scholarship into these two women tell us that both of these women served very actively and very faithfully. In Luke 8, a couple chapters prior, Jesus proclaims that his family are those who hear God's Word and do it. Jesus clearly states that those who hear his Word have an obligation to act on what they learned.

I believe that Jesus is expressing concern for Martha's anxiety and distraction. In her busyness, in her distraction, in her worry, she is, as Reverend Pat Bennet says, unable to be properly present in the moment, and in its necessary tasks. I think Jesus is reminding her – and reminding us through this story – that first we sit, and we listen. We tend to our souls. And when we quiet ourselves and listen, we come to know our own souls. And we serve from our truest selves. When we quiet ourselves and listen, we can hear concerns of the world, we can discern which tasks can be reached

through our unique skills, and we can discern which tasks are best left for others. When we quiet ourselves and listen, we can hear the voice of the divine, reminding us that we are beloved. This is who we are, and our worth and our value doesn't come from the work that we do, but from our own selves. When we quiet ourselves and listen, we can hear our unique call to partner in freedom with God and God's people in the ongoing work here on earth. And we can do this from a place of joy. Let us pray:

O God, still our hands for a moment and open our ears. May we hear your voice calling to us in love. May we hear truth about ourselves, our community, our world. May we care for ourselves so that we can care for others around us. And may we have the wisdom to discern the difference between work that is driven by our human worries, and work that is in response to your loving call to us. Amen.