

Weekly Reading – Tuesday, July 12, 2010

For this week, the lessons for Sunday July 18, 2010, we turn to an archive edition from July 16, 2007. I trust you'll find these reflections still apt three years later. Back with fresh reflections next week.

The readings for this week can be heard as a point and counter point. Amos' stark demand for justice and his condemnation of Israel provides a backdrop for the words of grace and reconciliation of Colossians. Amos' call for works of compassion is balanced by Luke's story of Mary, who simply rests in Jesus' presence. Each text stands on its own as God's word for our time. But the fullness of God's truth may be heard more clearly as we listen to the different voices.

Amos 8:1-12

In his vision of the basket of summer fruit, Amos points us to the harvest, the time when the fruit is gathered in and the growing season is over. Amos contrasts the way God sees time with the way we often view time. Those to whom Amos spoke may not have been guardians of Day-Timers or had their next appointment available at the click of a finger on their Blackberry, but they shared with us a compulsion to use time profitably. The Sabbath was something to be endured rather than celebrated. Sabbath time was not an opportunity to become closer to God and our neighbor, but an obstacle to the acquisition of wealth. Religious festivals were to be rushed through so that business could resume as usual. In the hustle and bustle of life and the relentless striving for success, the needy were trampled upon and the poor brought to ruin. God condemns a system in which the disparity between rich and poor increases as the ephah becomes smaller and the shekel greater. God pronounces the most extreme judgment upon God's people: the famine of hearing the words of the Lord. No matter where they seek God's voice, they shall not hear it. The result of the actions of the people will be complete alienation from God. In Israel, prophets had a long tradition of arguing with God. Abraham bargained with God over the fate of Sodom.

Moses got God to change God's mind. Earlier, Amos begged God to cease and God had relented. Now God tells him to "Be silent." Amos must not try to dissuade God. The time for dialogue is past. This is not a wake-up call.

The time for sentencing has come. In preaching this text, the comparisons between our world and the world Amos condemned are obvious. Less obvious, but hidden in the text, are glimmers of hope. The Nile, which rises each spring in catastrophic flooding, brings with it the promise of the next year's crop. The God who pronounces judgment is the God of compassion, who weighs in on the side of the needy and the poor. When it comes to caring for the poor and reordering our lives in accordance with God's time, there is nothing in the text to let us off the hook. A word of grace to us, however, is the reminder that there is nothing worse than the loss of God's word

– not the loss of job or home or health or family. We often fear the loss of the wrong things, and in so doing miss the gifts of time and community that God is giving us.

Colossians 1:15-28

There is a lyrical, mystical quality to this text. It is more poetry than prose. John Calvin believed that the creeds should be sung rather than spoken. If this text was part of an early Christian Creed, as some scholars suggest, then perhaps he was right. The high Christology expressed by the words is like music and might best be addressed through the language of metaphor and stories. While Christians affirm the triune God, experientially we come to know God through Jesus Christ. What we know about God is consistent with what we know about Jesus because “he is the image of the invisible God”. This text points to the pre-existent Christ and also to Christ who is the “first-born of the dead”. His death and resurrection establishes his preeminence as the one through whom life is given. Jesus’ impact and reign reverberates through all that is, as the beginning and the end of all things. The scope of God’s saving grace in Christ reaches from the recesses of the earth to heaven’s heights, embracing all that is, not just our individual human souls. Nothing can escape the breadth and depth of God’s love in the cross of Christ. Lest we soar into a kind of mystic reverie, the text directs us to Christ’s fleshly body and his death. This incredible holding together of all things and reconciling all things to God is rooted in the historical reality of Christ’s death. The words speak of a mystical union between Christ and his body, the church, in which our suffering is linked to the purposeful suffering of Christ and Christ himself lives in us. There is no hidden mystery, reserved only for the initiated.

It has all been revealed to all Christians as they work to become mature in the faith. The Colossians text provides a contrast to the reading from Amos. Amos offers little hope for reconciliation. In Colossians our hope is rooted, not in our own worthiness, but God’s saving grace in Christ, who is able to present us blameless before God. If we rush to embrace the message of Colossians over Amos, we must not miss the fact that our reconciliation with God is contingent upon our continuing secure and steadfast in the faith, without shifting in our hope.

Luke 10:38-42

The account of Jesus’ visit with Martha and Mary follows close on the heels of the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus’ affirmation of Mary, “who has chosen the better part” stands in juxtaposition to his command to the lawyer in the Samaritan story to “go and do likewise.” Jesus directs the lawyer toward compassionate service and Jesus praises Mary’s choice to rest in Jesus’ presence rather than to serve. Both are necessary for those who would follow Jesus. A question, frequently asked at women’s retreats is:

“Are you a Martha or a Mary?” The question can be misleading, because there is some of Mary and some of Martha in each of us. Martha, who rushes around

preparing and serving the meal, is distracted. She deprives herself of the gift of Jesus' presence and teaching. She has made herself like the people whom Amos condemns for ignoring or resenting the Sabbath, rather than ceasing their striving and entering into the Sabbath as a gift. Martha burdens herself and others with unnecessary obligations and expectations.

Mary, who infuriates her sister by hanging around and listening to Jesus instead of lifting a finger to help, is praised by Jesus. Doesn't Jesus have a clue about what it takes to provide a meal? Has he no sense of what is fair or appropriate? Is he blind to Martha's frantic attempt to please him? Or is Jesus gently calling Martha to let go of her worries and, like Mary, enter into the grace present at that moment. Our worries and distractions take us away from Jesus. Jesus states that what Mary has cannot be taken from her.