

NOT AS EASY AS IT LOOKS
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 21, 2013
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Amos 8.1-12;
Psalm 52;
Colossians 1.15-28;
Luke 10.38-42

This past week has seen a firestorm since the news of George Zimmerman's acquittal became public in the trial over the death of Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager who was killed last February. I first learned of this news when I saw a post on facebook that members of the Middle Collegiate Church in New York city were being invited by one of their pastors (a colleague of mine from seminary days) to wear a hoodie to worship in solidarity with the Martin family and in protest to this verdict. Over 100 protests have occurred around the country and many, many words have been spoken in outrage, in lament, and in defense of whether justice had been done in this heartbreaking case. So much ferment has erupted around this case that the President of the United States himself on Friday added his own commentary to the volume that had been spoken before. I struggled in this week to know how to respond -- what is needed in this time?

At the same time, some acts of racial intimidation occurred in our own neighborhood. I was so grateful that the Human Relations Commission called an emergency meeting on Thursday night. It was standing room only and we heard stories in that room that were precisely the same experiences that President Obama alluded to in his remarks on Friday. When something like this acquittal happens or when someone breaks a window while yelling a racial slur, African Americans and other people of color view these events through a whole grid of experiences they have had before. Times when they have been targeted for suspicion because of the color of their skin; times when they have been subject to hate speech and bullying; times when they know that they were passed over and rejected not because of their skills or their behavior or their track record but simply because of how they look. When this continues to happen in the year 2013, what should we do? What should we say? What does God's Word say to us in times like these?

There's no question what Amos would do. He would step into the fray and he would rage against the injustice that surrounded this boy's death. I'm not speaking to the question of whether this verdict was legal. I'm speaking to the context in which our distrust for one another has led us to create laws like Stand Your Ground. I'm talking about the kind of snap judgments we all make when we walk the streets about who

belongs and who is out of place and who is up to no good. I'm talking about the way the justice system fails to bring justice in so many situations. Or maybe another way to say it is in the simple words of the Episcopal Bishop from Florida who said "I want to live in a world where George Zimmerman offered Trayvon Martin a ride home to get him out of the rain that night."

I don't know what happened that night. I don't know with certainty what should have happened in that trial. All I know is that the story of this tragedy is touching a very painful place of suffering and injustice in our nation and we need to listen to what that suffering is about.

When it comes to wrestling with how we should respond in this or any complicated situation in life, I have found some wisdom from these texts that are before us today. So I want to look at those texts with you today.

Luke records two powerhouse stories back to back in the center of chapter 10. The first is a parable - the one we considered last week - about the Good Samaritan. The second is the account of a visit Jesus makes to the home of two sisters. On the surface the story of Mary and Martha seems so simple. My mother once told me a story about a four year old boy from the church I grew up in who tried to tell his mother about the meaning of this text. His mom had just had a new baby and was having a particularly hectic day. And this four year old boy had been trying to get his mother's attention all day long. She was always busy with something all day long. Finally, at the end of the day he stands with his hands on his hips and shook his head and said to his mother (who is not named Martha by the way) "Martha, Martha, Martha." I understand that he is about to enter Western Seminary so I have to find him and see if this story is true.

Clearly to his four year old mind, the meaning of this story was quite obvious but the history of interpretation for this text makes clear that it has been anything but obvious ever since the story was told. Gender dynamics have certainly pervaded some of this commentary. Some have pointed out that Mary is praised for sitting at the feet of Jesus in the posture of a disciple before a Rabbi - - a role typically reserved for men in that day. Others have wanted to reclaim Martha's role, a typically female role in many societies, observing that the making of meals belongs to the very spiritual task of offering hospitality and that hospitality is elevated throughout Scripture as an absolute requirement of the law and a primary way in which members of God's household are to express love for their neighbor.

Still others leave aside the gender dynamics and focus instead on Mary and Martha as examples of particular traditions or emphases in the faith. Mary representing the more contemplative tradition that seeks to read the Word and meditate on it. This tradition emphasizes the life of the mind, a life of reflection and prayer. It is an emphasis being reclaimed today by those who recognize the bankruptcy of our overscheduled, action-

filled, frenetic pace of life. Part of me felt the pull toward contemplation this week not to jump into the fray but to sit and listen to all that was being said this week and all that was stirring in my own soul and simply sit before God to listen for a while.

Martha on the other hand is seen as representing the more service and outreach tradition that seeks to embody the Word of God through action with ministries of compassion oriented toward the tangible, real needs of people in the world. Part of me felt drawn in this direction as well to reach out and DO something.

The dialogue around the meaning of this text has been pretty impassioned through the centuries. When you look at the texts themselves it becomes clear that for Luke when it comes to discipleship this is not a choice between two camps. You must read the parable of the Good Samaritan alongside the story of Mary and Martha.

In this story Mary has chosen the better part; the place of listening, and reflection, to wrestle with her mind around the ideas that Jesus was presenting. But remember when the young lawyer last week wanted to discuss ideas with Jesus and do some heady theology, Jesus had no time for it. Jesus told him that the place where eternal life is found is where love for neighbor is put into action....service is the better part. Clearly we have to look a little more closely to see what it is exactly about Martha's behavior Jesus is chastising and exactly what it is about Mary's behavior that he is holding up. When we do that I think we'll see that it isn't a choice of one over the other.

To get at the heart of what concerns Jesus in this story I want you to think of a time when you were a guest in someone's home and made to feel welcome. There are tell-tale signs that some effort and work went into the preparation for your visit. Clean linens reveal that some laundry was done. Meals emerge which show that some planning and shopping was completed. But this preparation is done behind the scenes and is only obvious if you pay attention to it. Because since you have arrived the host has been at ease and interacted with you in way that makes clear how important you are to them. Contrast that with the sort of visit at someone's home where the effort and the work that has gone into the visit is painfully obvious at every turn. The host is scurrying about the house, fussing over every detail, preparing an elaborate meal that keeps them in the kitchen and out of the conversation for hours at a time. You can feel the anxiety driving the whole endeavor.

The absorption with the details and the distraction from the people is what makes the difference in those two visits. As one commentator observed, when someone is overwhelmed and distracted by many things - as Martha is in this story - the original intention gets subverted.¹ Martha's intention was to welcome Jesus but in her anxious preparations she failed to listen to him. She failed to give him any of her attention; she

¹ William Loder makes this observation in his online commentary on the texts for the day.

failed to hear what it was he was really needing from her – the platinum rule as I talked about it with the children this morning.² Jesus wanted Mary and Martha’s attention. He did not need a big elaborate meal. He needed to unburden his heart. He was on his way to Jerusalem, his life was coming to an end, and he had things to say. Mary chose in that moment the better part.

If we want to be a faithful follower of God in the way of Jesus Christ then we need to hold all of these dimensions of discipleship together. Eternal life is found as we give ourselves away for the sake of our neighbor – making space as Andrew preached last Sunday to make God’s love real for the people right in front of us. AND we cannot know what action is required from us if we do not sit with regularity in quiet contemplation to hear God’s Word and let God’s Spirit reshape us. We need to let the Spirit speak to those places of anxious distraction and help us become the kind of people who have wisdom to offer when we are called as Amos was to speak to the broken places within our lives and within the world that must be confronted in our life together.

Not every situation calls for the same response. Being a disciple of Jesus means learning how to place our finger on the pulse of God’s heart and people’s needs.

It’s not as easy as it looks.

In the tumult of this week, I received a gift from my Saturday morning prayers that I want now to share with you as a starting place for our prayer for meditation this morning.

Let us pray:

In the busyness of this day, grant me a stillness of seeing, O God.
In the conflicting voices of my heart, grant me a calmness of hearing.
Let my seeing and hearing, my words and my actions,
 be rooted in a silent certainty of your presence.
Let my passion for life and the longings for justice that stir within me
 be grounded in the experience of your stillness.
Let my life be rooted in the ground of your peace, O God,
Let me be rooted in the depths of your peace.³

² The Platinum Rule is “Do unto others as they want done unto them.”

³ From the Saturday morning prayers in the prayer book called *Celtic Benediction* by J. Phillip Newell.