

“The Better Part”

Amos 8:1-12; Colossians 1:15-28;
Luke 10:38-42

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It is good to be back. We had a wonderful trip, and I hope things in your life have been going well. It is wonderful to go to these places that seem so far away and to enter into the life, the experience of a group of people in a very different type of atmosphere and circumstance, who are also listening and wanting to serve God, to worship God, to experience what it means to follow Jesus and to know the grace of Christ. That in itself was a great experience. It's a reminder of how we are connected through our faith to people around the world and how God is active and present.

I would say, however, that on this particular trip for me there were a number of overtones. It didn't really have anything to do with the communities we were in. It had to do with what was happening in the world as we traveled from Taizé to the UK, as we traveled through Glasgow. We did it on the eve of something that was called Brexit. Maybe you have heard of it. It kind of tossed things up in the air. The UK voted to leave the euro-zone. So far it's just a vote, but they voted and now real uncertainty has developed. There's a certain way it was helpful for us. The value of the British Pound Sterling went down, so it made our trip a little cheaper. Yet that was due to uncertainty. There are some times in your life where you don't know what's going to happen next. For a number of people we met, that's the feeling I got about this idea of Brexit.

If that weren't enough, there were other overtones. Again we heard of shootings in the United States. First of two young black men shot, and then of policemen shot. Then there are the events of Nice. It has not stopped. There are the events of this morning in Baton Rouge. Three more officers have died. How do we respond to all of this that's going on?

I think one of the things it drove home to me is that as we think about our faith, we can't do it in isolation from the world we live in. Each of these things that have happened—the Brexit, the shootings, the violence, even the political environment we live in where there is such a divide—and influence the nature of the world in which we live. How do we go forward? These events fire many deep feelings.

In talking to young UK folk, sometimes there are splits in families over this. Sometimes young folk feel betrayed by the vote that was taken in the UK. In our own country, there are divides over our understanding of how things work. It feels like the old divide of race is like a fault line that has become active again. Just as in the midst of an earthquake, I don't know how it's going to settle out, and yet I know that in the midst of it we need first responders. We need people who care for those who are hurt and grieving. How do we respond?

It makes me think again of an experience Helen and I had last year when we went to Northern Ireland. One of the things that struck me so much about that trip to Northern

Ireland was how religion was in some ways blamed for this division between people. You had the Scottish Protestants and the Irish Catholics, whose ethnic lineage was probably pretty much the same, and yet they identified in these two groups and there was a war—violence—that went on between them. People told us it really wasn't about the religion, it was about the heritage—who had power and who didn't. It made me realize that so often we use whatever distinctions we have to make some person or group into an “other.”

In today's world it feels so much of the time the way we try to deal with our problems is with violence. It feels like we've been told over and over again that we can justify violence, especially if it's retaliation or revenge. I just think about all the movies I've seen that justify violence by revenge. I talked about that last time I was here: the trouble in today's world and using violence as a solution. Where do we turn? When we are caught in a world that's divided, in the midst of grief and tragedy, where do we turn?

It's always a struggle to talk about this, but if I look at Amos, I can't help but wonder if we're in a famine of the voice of God. The way things are going in the world today aren't that dissimilar from what Amos is talking about. The needy are trampled and the poor are ruined and the people are not listening for God.

Where in our public discourse today is there a sense of our Judeo-Christian tradition, let alone a sense of the voice of God? If we are stuck between ourselves, one way of thinking versus another way of thinking, and there's no transcendence that helps us out of that trap, I think we're stuck. Paul suggests the same thing. When we forget about God, when we're not listening, we do evil deeds. How do we respond?

I think one of the ways of responding, of beginning to think about this, is to wonder about that idea of the famine of voice. Are we listening? Even in the story of Martha and Mary, it's easy to be the Martha. Really, what I tend to go to God with—we could do all kinds of things with this story, but I would like to look at it in a fairly broad way—I tend to be the Martha and go to God and say, “Can you just send somebody along to help fix this?” God seems to be saying through Amos, through Paul, through Jesus that we have the ability to respond. We are response-able. We are responsible. My desire is to just have God fix things, but in some ways God has already said, “I fixed things.” How? By teaching us, so we might begin by listening to God.

If the world is going to hell in a hand basket, it's probably not God's fault. It's hard to think about that somehow we are at fault, we are responsible. What is our first response? I think the first response is to be willing to listen. You see, in each of these passages I think that what it's saying is if we want the world to change then we have to listen to God. We have to look at where God would take us. We have to hear what God cares about. We have to hear how God has created the world. We have to think about how God is speaking into our lives. In the midst of all this tragedy, really what I want is just to have my grief fixed and for everything to be OK. I want compassion. But sometimes in the midst of that hope I forget that I have a responsibility, and these passages remind me that I need to listen.

Even my response of grief tends to be all about myself. What God continues to do, I think, is to pull us out and say, "Come. Listen." Let's start there. Let's sit down and listen to what Jesus has to say. So what I'm going to recommend we do this week is to listen to Jesus, and particularly two passages. The first is in Matthew. It's a fairly long discourse called the Sermon on the Mount. It starts in Chapter 5 and ends at the end of Chapter 7. Then there's the Sermon on the Plain. It starts in Chapter 6 of Luke, verse 20 and goes through verse 48. Not quite as long. I invite us to read those through this week, and to listen to what Jesus is saying.

For me that's the starting point. If we can't, in the midst of all that's going on in the world, look to the One... Well, it's a little counter to the way the world suggests we do things today, that we actually listen to what our scriptures say and then give them real weight, and to think that God has in them something to teach us about how we live, and work, and do our lives, and care for one another, and not just react to retaliation or violence. Let's listen, because I think it starts with listening to God and listening to each other.

Jesus said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are distracted and worried about so many things. Mary has the better part." In the midst of the chaos of the world, it reminds me to start with that better part. Amen.