

July 21, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Sitting and Listening

Amos 8:1-12 *...they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.*

Psalm 52 *"See the one who would not take refuge in God, but trusted in abundant riches, and sought refuge in wealth."*

Luke 10:38-42 *"...there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

The readings from the prophet Amos and Psalm 52 provide an interesting backdrop to the familiar story of Martha and Mary in Luke's gospel. All three readings are about listening and not listening. When we listen deeply, we find life. When we do not, we experience chaos and disaster. All major spiritual traditions teach the cultivating of inner quietness so that we can give attention to life, so that we can listen to God. The outward life can become empty and even destructive when disconnected from the inward life, from insight and understanding that comes from deep listening. Anthony de Mello says that we try to fix things and help people when we do not understand the situation or the person or the need, in other words, when we do not listen.

Amos was a prophet in the time leading up to Israel's exile in Babylon. Israel's national life was in a downward spiral. The wealthy were getting wealthier at the expense of the poor. The making of money had eclipse spiritual practice. The money makers could not wait until the holy days end so they could get back to their commercial practices, which were greed-oriented and dishonest, exploiting the common person. Amos saw that the roots of the dilemma were spiritual, as they always are. When human society drifts into selfishness, greed, injustice, and violence, humans and the earth itself suffer. "Shall not the land tremble on this account, and everyone mourn who lives in it," says the prophet.

The reading ends with God saying through the prophet that there will be "a famine of hearing the words of the Lord." People will "run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it." It comes back to listening to and hearing what is most important, then shaping our lives out of what we hear. The lesson is clear in terms of the corruption, injustice,

and exploitation we see today in our nation. Poverty is increasing. The wealth of the wealthiest is increasing. The economics of amassing personal wealth leads inevitably to ruin for everyone. We have great suffering ahead if there are not changes. Life does not come from selfishness, greed, and exploitation. Life comes through generosity, sharing, equity, and care of those in need. We know that, IF we are listening.

The psalm echoes the theme, condemning those who hurt others on their way to wealth and power. Ego-centered living hurts and destroys not only others but oneself as well. The psalmist is saying that those who put their trust in, who take refuge in, wealth and their own cleverness at getting what they want will reap disaster. Seeing the emptiness and destructiveness of that pattern of living, the psalmist expresses gratitude that he has rooted his own life in God and the community of faith, of those who listen. Again it is about listening, taking refuge in God so that our life is sustained by what is true and good and lasting. That is what we do when we practice the inward journey, as persons and as a community. We are taking refuge in God, quieting ourselves inwardly so that we can listen deeply and gain insight and understanding, opening ourselves to God and to life as God created it.

So we come to the story of Martha and Mary. It is a centerpiece for the spiritual life as an inward and outward journey of following Jesus, with emphasis on the importance of sitting and listening. I use the phrase "sitting and listening" as an image for attuning ourselves to God and God's living word. It is important to literally practice sitting and listening, as well as to live in that spirit throughout the day, each day. We can, with practice, have a "sitting and listening spirit" any time and any where.

Martha invites Jesus to her home. She is busy, probably preparing dinner. Her sister Mary, is sitting "at the Lord's feet" listening to Jesus. First of all, the story shows a radical shift in the position of women. The phrase "sitting at the Lord's feet" describes discipleship. To sit at the teacher's feet means to be a disciple, a follower, a student. We are a community of those who sit at Jesus' feet, listening to his words, his life, his spirit as he awakens us to our life in God. Mary is clearly a disciple. This story is a vivid illustration of Paul's words: "In Christ there is neither male nor female...." If the church had been listening to Jesus all along, it would have known that women were fully included! A follower of Jesus is anyone whose heart, mind, and life are open to Jesus and what we learn through him.

The second thing is the contrast between Martha and Mary. Martha complains to Jesus about her sister. Make her help me with all this work! Here she is "doing all the work," while her sister just sits there "doing nothing." We are a "don't just sit there, do something" culture, and it carries over into the church. This story teaches the reverse: Don't just do something, sit there. Also, there is the spiritual issue of our complaining about others, what they are or are not doing. When we fall into complaining about others, it is usually an indicator that we need to look at ourselves. We have taken our eyes off our own lives, and are distracting ourselves with judging and measuring others.

Jesus responds. Martha, you are distracted and anxious about many things. There is only one necessary thing. Mary has chosen it, and it can never be taken from her. Jesus is not saying that we are to do nothing but sit around in silence and listening. Discipleship also means doing what we are led to do out of the listening. However, the outward, the doing, can become a distraction and a source of anxiousness, if disconnected from the source of it all. I think Jesus is talking about priorities. Doing must be rooted in and flow out of being, of listening. When our doing starts filling us with anxiousness and making us distracted or resentful, then it is time to go back and sit at Jesus' feet, to listen, to be quiet.

Silence and inner listening are an essential part of our spiritual practices as Covenant and Community Members, our worship together each Sunday, and our mission groups. Yet letting go of or neglecting the inward journey is the easiest thing in the world to do. Our schedules become full. We take on too many responsibilities. There are times we feel that we just don't have time for even thirty minutes a day for our inward journey. This reveals that we still see the inward journey as something optional, that is good IF you have the time for it. The most important thing is keeping busy.

Jesus doesn't buy that. We have the time when we MAKE the time for what is most important. And if we don't make the time for it, it will sooner or later show in our spirits and our living. Jesus' view seems to be that what we call the inward journey is the most important thing, prior to everything else. It is the one thing that will never be taken from us. Why? Because when we are working daily with our inward journey, cultivating our ability to be inwardly quiet and attentive, we are waking up to life—our own life, our life in God, and life around us. We are learning how to drop our distractions and anxiousness, and along with that,

our fears. We are seeing our own lives in the context of all of life as God created it. We are beginning to live authentically, from the center where we meet God.

It is as though Jesus is saying to Martha, and also to us, I know you think you are serving me with all those things you are doing. But they are only making you preoccupied and, frankly, a bit crabby! You want to drag others into your frenzy of activity and fretfulness. The good news for Martha, and for us, is that she can stop all of that. She doesn't have to continue her agitated and stressed state. She can stop, become quiet, and listen. She can shift the balance of her life, give her life a new center, a quiet center where she is in touch with God, with herself, and with life.

This little story is a perfect touch-stone for us as a community. It helps us reflect on ourselves with regard to the outward and inward dimensions of our lives. Are we fretful and anxious, consumed by all the things we are doing so that we are out of touch with our own lives, with other people, and with life around us? Has the balance of our lives shifted away from the inward journey to a compulsiveness about getting things done, accomplishing great things? Do we find ourselves complaining about all we have to do, all that we have said yes to, instead of searching for and living out of what we are truly called to do? Knowing what we are called and gifted to do arises not from the outside but the inside where we listen to God, to ourselves, and to life. When we are living out of that center, that thing that can never be taken from us, we end up living with more energy and joy, more purpose and focus, more wisdom and love.

When I think about the importance of cultivating our spiritual lives, of making the time to give attention to the inward journey, of growing in our capacity to be still and quiet and listening, my deepest sense of the urgency about it is just this: We are paying attention to that which, beyond everything else that we do in our lives, will never be taken from us, can never be lost. It is the source of living a life that is full, joyful, and loving. It is also the source of a human family that is just, generous, compassionate, and peaceful.

Yesterday morning as I was settling into silence, mindful of the texts for today, I remembered an ancient prayer. It is from The Upanishads, the four thousand year old scriptures of Hindu spirituality and culture. It came to me as I realized that when we are truly listening to life, to God, we become transformed in our hearing, seeing, and understanding.

We grow beyond the ego, the small self, into the large Self, into awareness of our lives within all of life. It becomes less about me and mine and what I want, and more about us, all of life, and our own well being connected to the well being of all. That is what happens when we “sit and listen”, as persons, as a spiritual community, as a nation, and as a human family. Here is the prayer.

May we hear only what is good for all.

May we see only what is good for all.

May we serve you, Lord of Love, all our life.

May we be used to spread your peace on earth.

OM shanti shanti shanti (peace, peace, peace)

(The Upanishads, translated by Eknath Easwaran)