

Mary and Martha, with help from Amos!

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

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Lots of people are very diet-conscious these days...have you noticed? And everyone seems to have a theory about what you should eat in order to be healthy. There is a never-ending stream of “new and improved” approaches to proper nutrition.

As many of you will know, I have my own set of weirdness when it comes to eating, and I try to read a fair amount about that....

But you know what? Over and over again, the bottom line, once you’re cleared away all the hype and the product-selling, the bottom line for healthy nutrition is balance.

Balance.

A truly healthy diet, (shock of all shocks) is a balance of grains, protein, dairy or equivalent, and produce. Fruits and vegetables. In the end it’s not rocket science; it’s not some mystery that only the initiated can figure out, there are no secrets to it...it’s common sense. And balance.

So easy, really – and so very hard to achieve.

I thought of that when I read the Amos reading this morning. This is the passage where he uses the basket of ripe summer fruit. One thing a balanced diet needs is fruit. And one thing we need for balance in our understanding of God’s will is this basket of fruit from Amos.

Ripe summer fruit.

Last week he used a plumb line – remember? This week it’s ripe fruit.

Let’s review a bit about him before we go on...

Amos was living in Israel at a time of peace and prosperity. It was the reign of Jeroboam, and the country was as powerful and stable as it had ever been (or ever would be). When times are easy, when people don’t have to struggle to eat, or suffer war, certain things can happen. One is that there sets in (or CAN set in) a certain complacency...an understanding that these are God’s blessings, and that somehow we’re being rewarded by God for being good. (you can hear that message on any number of TV sermons...be good and God will reward you with riches. Money. Power. And of course the unspoken corollary to that is that if you are poor...then....it must be God’s displeasure...a kind of blaming the victim. It works great for the rich – eases the conscience and absolves us of responsibility. Handy little theological system!!!)

So there was some of that going on, and also, as often happens in societies where there is prosperity, power gets concentrated in the hands of a few, and the needs of the poor and most vulnerable are overlooked.

That’s what was happening.

Into that situation thunders Amos....a man on fire with anger and the quest for justice.

He's not subtle, to say the least...he's not polished...he's just MAD! righteous anger, and he's willing to say it. Loudly. He's a farmer, a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees. (I don't know what that means exactly but you get the picture.)

His message to them is really hard to hear.

You think this time of peace and prosperity is going to last, he says?

Take a look at what's happening underneath - the poor are being exploited, there's a rich group of the elite who aren't paying attention to the needs of the weakest and most vulnerable...and no one notices - no one cares. It looks like we're peaceful and prosperous, but the scales of justice are NOT balanced. They're not balanced at all.

And it cannot, will not continue this way forever.

This whole society is like a basket of strawberries - you know how they sometimes arrange them in the store with the nice looking ones on top but you have to check underneath? A basket like that, or just some really ripe ones. And if we don't start making jam, folks, RIGHT NOW they're going to rot.

(read verses 1-8)

The fruit is ripe. We've got to act NOW. Restore the balance of justice. Do what's right - get some perspective back. Listen to what was happening (verses 4-6) The values were way off...money became the prime motivator, people treated the Sabbath as something to endure while waiting for it to be over so they could return to making money, instead of welcoming it, craving it, as the delicious gift it really is....

False balances have been used. The way things are weighed, measured, valued...the balance is off.

The time is now. The fruit is ripe. For our society. For you.

Increasingly, science and theology are saying the same thing: the universe moves toward union, is made of the same stuff, is one.

This creation is formed to be, and to grow, in a sacred balance, of which we and all creatures are a part.

And part of what's out of balance is our sense of who we are in creation. We talked a little about this at the blessing of the animals service last week. We've acted (we, humans) as though we are the owners...apart from the earth. We've used it and exploited it for our own purposes without regard or respect for animals, or the land or future generations. And NOW we need to find the balance again. It's time to make jam, or the fruit will rot. It's time to take our rightful place as part of the sacred balance of things.

So...if this is true for society, for the earth

What about the personal?

Balance. Would you say your life is balanced? What would it mean to live a balanced life?

It seems to me as though Luke is trying to give us a clue.

He's a great writer - I know you know that. It's so interesting to watch not only the Jesus stories he chooses to tell, but how he tells them and how he arranges them.

For example, last week he told us the story of the Good Samaritan. (recap it here)

The punch line seemed to be “go and do the same”

The original question had been “teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” and the answer was...do THAT. Be a good neighbour. And who is my neighbour? Anyone, ANYONE who needs my help. Perhaps mostly those who are looked down upon and despised by others. Go, and do that, Jesus says.

There are a lot of people who need help. You could spend all day every day and it could become overwhelming.

Jesus knew that – Luke knew it too. And so here, RIGHT AFTER the story of the GS, he places this one.

The GS teaches us to DO the neighbourly thing...

And this story about Mary and Martha seems to be saying..you know what? You need time to NOT DO things as well.

That’s part of the balance of things.

It's also saying a lot between the lines about a proper balance between men and women.

In this short little passage, Luke has both Mary and Martha challenging traditional female roles. Martha seems to own the house, she talks to Jesus in a very familiar way, she accepts the role of head of the house and the responsibility that goes with it to offer hospitality. Mary sits at his feet like a disciple....

So there's quite a bit in here about a proper balance in that way too.

What does your life look like right now? Balance wise?

Balance between being, and doing...between doing things for other people, for yourself, and time with God? (and I know those lines are very blurry, but still...)

If you took a week, a typical week, wrote down everything you did in that week, with times marked beside them, and maybe energy too because that’s not the same as time often...

How would it stack up, do you think?

Is there a good balance of time in good works, time for you, time at the feet of Jesus? (and as I was writing this I thought that maybe that’s not fair either,...maybe it should be balance over a lifetime because there are times in your life when you don’t really have a choice about some things...times when you have more energy and so on....but let’s just do the present anyway)

What does the balance look like for you right now? And if you feel there’s an imbalance...what are you going to do about that?

There’s no better time, you know. The fruit is ripe. The time is now. Your health is at stake. Your physical health (we’re learning more and more about that part) and your emotional, spiritual health too. You need balance. So what is it that you need? More time alone? In prayer? More time spent doing things for others besides yourself or your

family?

That's a big part of what this story is inviting us to.

It's not about holding one of the sisters up against the other; not honouring one way of being as better than another, but inviting us to embody both.

I don't know if you've ever heard sermons pitting the sisters against each other but that's not a helpful way to go and it's not the full story. They are not caricatures: on the one hand a neurotic, fussy housekeeper and a lazy dreamer. When Lazarus dies, John reports that it was Mary who stayed home and Martha who went out to meet Jesus and ended up in quite a theological conversation. These women are fuller characters than they've been presented.

The other thing about this text is that Martha is doing the correct, prescribed, thing to do. In Israel at that time, hospitality was a HUGE concept; it was a social and religious duty to provide hospitality. It was what you DO for guests. Remember Luke's account of visiting the home of Simon? Jesus says to Simon "you didn't provide water for my feet, you didn't...but this woman did all that"...those were the things expected and required when a guest came to your home. So, like the priest in the story last week, Martha was doing what was right, what was expected by custom and ritual. Socially and religiously. It's Mary who is breaking the rules, if you will.

So...part of what's being asked of us here is also what is the balance between those two things? When is it right to do what's expected, and when is it the right thing to break those rules in the service of a greater good?

Good questions – no easy answers. I'm just asking. The TEXT is just asking.

These sisters ask us to take a good look at ourselves. Together, they represent a home, a way of being that honours life and praises God by a combination of service and silence, being and doing. A diet, if you will – a delicious, nutritious blend of things: food for their own souls and food for the guest and the stranger.

From Amos we hear the call to take that diet not only into our personal lives but into the economic and political worlds in which we live.

Our world, our society is hungry. We all need that same diet.

It's there, ready for us...a basket of ripe summer fruit. But we have to act NOW.

Let's restore the sacred balance in all of life.

Starting right here, right now.

I'm going to ask ____ to pass around this basket of strawberries. Please take one, eat it, enjoy it, and let the eating be a sign of your commitment to move toward the Sacred Balance for you and for the world.

Amen.