

“Equal Opportunity Unemployment”

Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – July 17, 2022

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might learn to pause and listen, rather than worrying so much about our work. In Jesus' name, Amen.

First of all, let me say something that is probably obvious, but worth pointing out, nonetheless: We are not at a women's retreat this morning. For far too long, this passage from Luke has been relegated to contexts in which the primary focus is on what it tells us about women's roles in the church. Why is it that for centuries we have supposed that the stories about Jesus' male disciples apply universally, but that the ones we have about female disciples are only relevant to women? It's nonsense, that's what. This past week, a group of 18 Junior Campers – 9 girls and 9 boys – watched a movie with a girl as the protagonist, and they were all mesmerized. If they can do it, so can you. So men, this is not your cue to tune out; this is your invitation to lean in and listen and learn.

Secondly, the point is not that men are just as welcome and able and obligated to help out in the church kitchen as women are, though that is also true. This story is not, in fact, about kitchen work at all. That is an assumption that has been painted on top of this story, because of a long history of patriarchal ideas about what women should and should not be doing in the church. This story isn't about the burden of cooking and cleaning up; it's about the burden of ministry. The word that is

translated “tasks” in our version is “diakonian.” That word, in pretty much every other place in scripture is translated “ministry,” the kind of ministry all the disciples did, male and female. Martha was stressed out from ministry, not because she was trying to get a big meal on the table. So enough with the assumptions that this story is about “women’s work,” whatever that is! This story is about the work we are all called to, as Christians, and the perils of letting that work become the main thing.

So let’s think about the work of being church, and what happens when we let the work become the focus, rather Jesus. First of all, let’s think about what that work is. Scripture gives us some clear direction on this: the work of ministry includes caring for the poor and the widows and orphans; feeding the hungry; bringing healing and comfort to the sick and company and release to those in prison; and working to dismantle the structures that increase rather than alleviate the suffering of all those who are marginalized. Over the centuries, the church has added many layers to that work: we’ve built buildings that need to be maintained, held gatherings to organize and celebrate where people need to be fed, and developed ministries that need to be funded. There are many layers to the work of the church, so we have many opportunities to stress out about whether that work is getting done or not.

You could argue that a lot of this work is hard and worrisome. But if we’re honest, many of us would have to admit that we prefer doing the work, even when it’s hard, over the stuff of church that seems less like work. There is a whole other part of being church beyond and underneath all this work that we too often neglect. This

story of Jesus addressing Martha's stress gets at that neglect. The passage we read from Amos illustrates with even greater drama what can happen if the other part of being church is ignored for too long.

What is this other part of being church? If we use the story of Martha and Mary as our guide, we can define it as simply listening to Jesus. To tease that out a little bit, it's about worship and prayer. It's about setting aside time from the doing of church – the “what” of church – to reflect on being church – the “Why” of church. Martha was exhausted and stressed out by her ministry because she had forgotten to pause and let God fill her cup back up. She hadn't quite forgotten what doing church was yet, but she'd lost track of her why.

In Amos, the people of Israel had gotten so far removed from their why, that their goals had shifted. They had forgotten whose they were and just focused on how to build themselves up as efficiently as possible, even if it involved cheating the poor and neglecting those in need. They hadn't sought out the word of the Lord for so long, they had lost the capacity to find it at all. And they didn't even know it yet! Amos saw a vision of a basket of summer fruit. Summer fruit is the best, right? Cherries, berries, watermelon, peaches... most of my favorites! But the thing about summer fruit is that it doesn't last long, does it? Amos is actually using a word-play here: the Hebrew word for “summer fruit” and the word for “end” sound very similar. So even though the rich cheaters and exploiters he was denouncing felt like life was a bowl of cherries, what they didn't realize was that it was all soon going to

rot all around them, because they had neglected to seek out God's word and guidance for how to live. Let us pray that the church has not wandered this far off the path of Christ.

Our own situation seems more like to be reflected in Martha's dilemma. She was still doing authentic and righteous ministry, but it was stressing her out because she'd forgotten to turn back to Jesus, the source and inspiration for her work. What happens when we take our eyes off Jesus but keep working? We forget that the work is God's, and we start to believe everything depends on us. That's exhausting. We forget that the work and the world are held in God's hands, and we start to believe we cannot afford to take a break because everything will fall apart if we do. That's exhausting. We look at those who are doing the work differently than we are, and we start to believe that we're the only ones who can do it right. That's exhausting.

Y'all know that I'm preaching this sermon to myself, right? But it's not only me, is it? What are some of the reasons we get absorbed by the work of church to the point that we forget to focus on the point of being church in the first place? We love the church, and we don't want it to fall apart; so whenever there's a sense that if we don't do something, nobody will, we step up to make sure it gets done. Many of us carry around a strong internal pressure toward perfectionism, which makes it hard to do anything halfway. We rationalize our obsession with the work by calling it a sacrifice of love so others don't have to do the work. We convince ourselves that we

can do it more efficiently than someone who doesn't do it as often, so we might as well go ahead and take their turn since we're right here anyway.

Quite frankly underneath all of that, many of us have kept ourselves so busy for so long that we've forgotten how to settle into holy moments of stillness where we can actually listen for God's voice and receive the cup-filling blessings that can only come when we slow down. We get antsy when we're not doing something. We worry that something is going undone. Rather than pausing in the silence to listen for Jesus, we start making mental lists of what needs to be done as soon as the quiet has ended.

Have you ever thought about why we aim to have 16 deacons, instead of two or four? The word that designated Martha's ministry "diakonia" is the same word that "deacon" comes from. We have learned from Martha how important it is not to rely on one or two people to do all the work. Rather, it is vital that we all take turns – sometimes serving in ways that make space for others to be in prayer and communion with God, and sometimes letting others serve so that we can be in prayer and communion with God.

The work of the church is a delicate thing. It is counter-cultural, not based on who earned what or who is worthy, but on a proclamation that all people are beloved children of God who deserve to flourish. If we neglect to listen to God's word reminding us of the values and convictions of our faith, we can easily let those worldly ideas about how the work should go slip into our consciousness. If we don't return to Jesus' feet on a regular basis, in Sunday worship and daily prayer, we can easily

come to believe that it all depends on us, which swiftly leads to burn-out and cynicism. If we don't let God lead the church, the church will wither. When we hold the work more loosely, letting new folks come in and take a turn, even if they don't do it quite the way we do it, God builds up the church and restores our souls.

So how can we – each of us, women and men – find the proper inner balance of our own Martha and Mary tendencies? Which part have you neglected? Have you been in worship, but not taken part in opportunities to live out the love you've received here? Have you been working so hard that you're too amped up to relax in worship and truly feel God's refreshing presence?

Jesus is calling you by name, calling you back to yourself, the you that exists beyond anything you do or say. Jesus is calling us into equal opportunity unemployment, holy idleness, just to sit and listen, to bask in the love of God, confident that there is no need for us to prove ourselves worthy by working our fingers to the bone. The work will still be there once we've had our cups filled back up. If we don't pause to fill them, we soon won't be able to attend to any of it. Let us quiet ourselves and sit in stillness sometimes, so that our work remains God's work, and not mere busy-ness distracting us from our true nature as God's beloved children. Hallelujah and Amen.