

**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 21, 2019  
Amos 8:1-12 & Luke 10:38-42

Criticism is never easy to hear and most of us work hard at avoiding it. Some of us, myself included, are driven by perfectionism – an unrealistic yet pressing desire to be faultless in order to avoid the shame of our flaws. We endeavor to make ourselves and the world around us perfect so that there would be no cause for criticism. Obviously, any rational mind would point out the futility of this effort; if anything is universally true of humanity – of creation, even – it is that we are naturally and inherently **not** perfect.

In fact, we cannot even speak of our lack of perfection perfectly. A friend of mine was listening to a very serious presentation on a very serious and solemn topic in which the speaker meant to say the word “imperfect” but actually said “**un-perfect**”. It took a moment for her to realize what she had said, but then she burst into laughter, with the audience laughing along with her.

I sometimes think “un-perfect” is a better term for the human condition. When I was in seminary, balancing motherhood, marriage, and a household, with being a full-time graduate student for three years, I was forced to abandon my desire for perfection. I was simply too worn down to try to do it all perfectly and so I had to make some compromises. I had to give up on the perfection I desired and instead strove for what I called “perfect enough.” Now, to those who love the precision of language, you will recognize how ridiculous it is to strive for “perfect enough” – something is either perfect, or without flaw, or it is not. Perfection is like pregnancy, there is no such thing as a “little bit” of either. Yet, as any pregnant woman will tell you, you feel way more pregnant at 8 months than you do at six weeks.

So, ‘perfect enough’ became my mantra in seminary and it helped me stay sane and in relationship with my family and friends. ‘Perfect enough’ recognizes and accepts the inherent ‘un-perfection’ of God’s creation. Remember, that God didn’t call his creation perfect, for only God is perfect, rather he called it good. Although there are multiple Hebrew words that mean perfect, or flawless, or pristine, our Genesis account does not have God using any them when describing His creation. Instead, God calls his creation ‘very good’, thus leaving room for the ‘un-perfection’ that still exists.

This summer, our scripture lectionary has us reading through some of the writings of the later prophets. Historically, the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures played an important role in social criticism. They gave voice to the voiceless and stood up to the powerful for those who were powerless. And our lesson today from the prophet Amos is a stinging and painful critique of God’s people who have turned away from God’s Word.

Amos, a farmer and herder from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, turns his critical eye upon the Northern Kingdom of Israel and denounces them for their injustice and unrighteousness. Israel, at this point, had attained a height of territorial expansion and national prosperity never again reached. And at the same time, this prosperity had led to gross inequalities between urban elites and the poor. Through the manipulation of debt and credit, wealthy landowners amassed capital and estates at the expense of small farmers. Amos, in the face of this injustice of the poor and powerless, boldly denounced the decadent opulence, immorality, and smug piety of elites who, as he put it, “trampled the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the

way.”<sup>1</sup> And instead he spoke of God’s desire for “justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”<sup>2</sup>

Our lesson today begins with a vision and then provides an oracle of God’s future action. In Amos’ vision, God uses a basket of summer fruit, long an image of abundant harvest that symbolized God’s favor upon his chosen people, and he turns it inside out to serve now as a warning of punishment. What once had been evidence of righteousness and giftedness, instead now sours and portends doom and desolation.

The following verses contain a painful indictment of Israel, in which Amos exposes the immoral and unjust practices of the merchant and ruling elites, calling their attention with this: “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land.”<sup>3</sup> Amos then pronounces the consequences of Israel’s sinfulness in which the day will come when the earth will tremble and heave like angry waters; darkness will overcome the land, and their feasts will turn to mourning and their songs into lamentations. And as bad as that sounds, it isn’t even the worst of it. No, the worst will be the utter desolation caused by the famine of God’s Word – God’s known and experienced presence in the world.

Amos describes it this way: “The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.”<sup>4</sup> This famine inflicts the suffering of a spiritual yearning that is deeper than the need for food and water. Without God’s living Word, abundance has become famine, overflowing streams of blessing have become dry thirst, and ripe and sweet fruit have become sour and rotten. In Israel’s pursuit of the “goods” of personal gain, they have turned their backs on the very God who is the source of all goodness. In their acts of oppression, injustice, and fear-based selfishness, they have rejected God and, in doing so, they can no longer hear God’s Word. And there is truly nothing more harrowing than the experience of God’s abandonment - the silence of God’s Word.

Of course, it is not really God who abandons us – it is not God who stops speaking His Word into His creation. Rather it is us who turn away – who, because of our fearful sinfulness, stopper our ears to God’s eternal and life-sustaining love song. Our pursuit of what is unjust and unrighteous results in our turning away from God’s Word – and in that rejection, we impose upon ourselves a famine of the presence of the living God. And it turns out, that this is the “one thing” we need more than anything else.

The hope, however, is that if we, out of our own fear and selfishness, turn away from God, then we, with God’s grace, are able to turn back. Even God’s critique of our sin is laced with the loving grace of the constant invitation into communion with Him. Our gospel lesson today illustrates the critique of this turning away and the invitation to return to communion with God, which is the “one thing” that Mary has placed first and foremost.

We all know this story of Martha and Mary. Martha and Mary welcome Jesus and his disciples into their home. And while Martha gets busy with the important work of service and hospitality, Mary chooses instead to sit at Jesus feet and listen to his teachings. Martha, miffed at being left to do all the work, breeches the bounds of hospitality by complaining to Jesus that Mary has abandoned her to serve as host and asks him to intervene. Jesus then answers, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 2:7 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 5:24

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 8:4

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 8:11-12

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:41-42

Much has been made of this lesson and its many different interpretations. Most often, people set up Martha and Mary as contrasting figures in order to advance whatever social criticism is in favor at the time. But I think these interpretations say more about those doing the interpreting than they illuminate Jesus' true meaning. I think Jesus's concern is not so much about critiquing social convention, as it is about critiquing the quality of devotion expressed – the undivided focus on the “one thing” needed.

The problem isn't the busyness of Martha's many tasks and acts of service, rather it is that she became distracted while performing them – that, in her worry and anxiety, she lost focus and turned away from the source and purpose of these acts: devotion and attention to God's incarnate Word.<sup>6</sup> As 'un-perfect' as Mary might have been in this story – and, honestly, it would have been nice if she helped out her beleaguered sister – but as 'un-perfect' as Mary might have been, her focus never strayed. When Jesus says that “Mary has chosen the better part,” he is referring to her singular focus on God's Word.

Mary was in need of only “one thing” ... and it wasn't perfection but the sustained and intentional focus on the living presence of God. Striving for perfection leaves no room for our un-perfect humanity, and it leaves no room for us to return when we have turned away from God. We, in our un-perfection, are in need of only “one thing” – the living and loving presence of God who is always calling us to himself.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Skinner, Matthew, L., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*; 267