

21 July 2019

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Luke 10:38-42

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying.⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me."⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

But One Thing is Needful? Really?

Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things.

Discovering that line, right there in the middle of the standard behavioral paradigm, was a boon to me at 17. It pseudo-piously deflected the stream of instructions that used to issue from my mother, a careful, troubled person who handled stress and fear by telling me to straighten up the world. Unload the dishwasher! Take out the trash! Hang up your jacket. And I'm like, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things.

A boon: the gifts of God for the people of God.

When, I wonder, did I start to use that line against myself, in a different tone of voice? In my twenties? In my thirties? Martha, thou are careful and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful.

For years I could have named that thing. I could have said exactly what it was: transcendence. In the world you will have tribulation, Jesus advises, because the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong; because much is crooked,

and it can't be straightened; because much is lacking, and it can't be counted.
But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.

I rode with transcendent Jesus for a thousand thousand miles, and I loved him well. He was my great good friend, whose gaze I sought behind the broken windows of this weary, unintelligible world — sought and found, and I thank God for that.

Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful, and Mary hath chosen that good part.

Well, what if I don't believe that anymore?

My twenties and thirties went the way of all flesh a hundred years ago: I turned sixty today. By now I've set a lot of tables myself, and washed a lot of dishes myself, after feeding children of my own, after burying dead of my own, including my mother, and now I'm like, "Get up and help her clear the dishes, man, for Pete's sake! All those mansions in your father's kingdom? every one of them is run by Martha."

It makes me nervous to stand here in the middle of the sanctuary Jesus built and speak to him the way my mother used to speak to me. I'm about to start my fourth year of seminary training, and my third year of spiritual direction with Ethel Hornbeck, and the fruit of all that study and immersion is that I think Jesus might be wrong? No: I started thinking that when I was 17, when I first lifted up that line against my mother — that is, when I first appropriated Jesus for a purpose of my own. No, the fruit of all that study and immersion is beginning to see how often I do exactly that: how often I use Jesus for a purpose of my own.

One of the things I'm learning in seminary is that the Bible rarely speaks in one direction, and if we zoom out from the Gospel passage for this week, we find that it's really part of last week's passage, which seems to point the other way. Last week a lawyer asked Jesus what we should do to inherit eternal life, and Jesus said, "Well here's what you shouldn't do: when you discover someone bleeding in the ditch, you shouldn't tell him to transcend, while you continue to the outlet mall. You should pick that person up and put him on your mule and take him to a hospital, and you should leave your Visa card to pay his bill. In verse 37 we're told to do that, and in verse 38 we're welcomed into Martha's house, with no transitional material, because that one needful thing, whatever it may be, cannot be separated from picking broken people up and putting them on the mule that you were going to ride yourself.

Zooming out a little further, to the lectionary passage from the prophet Amos, we hear what happens to a culture that routinely beats its people up and leaves them lying in the ditch. "Because they conspire to make the ephah small and the shekel great," the Lord says to Amos, "I will leave them now. Because they buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, I will leave them now. Because it pleases them to fill their flour sacks with mere detritus and to call it food and to sell it to the poor, tilting a dishonest scale, their feast will turn to famine now, and their song to lamentation, and their satin lingerie to burlap underwear!"

The scholar Walter Bruggeman calls Amos the founder of the Hebrew prophetic tradition, which would ultimately shape the Torah and give us the very language that construes God's love for justice and for mercy. Here's what happens to a culture that reserves the best seats and the finest wine for the

people who devise the coolest ways of getting other people's money. Prophet after prophet, into the center of power, telling the one percent what's going to happen now because they put their good minds to that use.

Well look around: are the scale-tilters wearing sack cloth? Are the chaff-sellers starving to death? Are the people whose life work is to make the ephah small and the shekel great singing songs of lamentation now? Or are they playing golf? The richest of them, those most committed to valuing their own prosperity ahead of everybody else's, like to play their golf with naked caddies, because why not? When you're a star, they let you.

I will leave them now, God says, and never pass them by again, and they're like Hallelujah! Let's get it on!

When the prophetic tradition is lifted up against exploiters and degraders to show that God loves justice, or mercy, or that God has any qualms whatsoever with the tilted balance, or the bloated shekel, or the over-stuffed detention center, my face begins to burn. I try to make myself look bigger than I am — I set my arms and rise up on my toes, because reality makes the prophetic tradition sound like chasing after wind, which means I'm on my own. And that terrifies me. I cling to the God of Grace — and reality lifts up a picture of a little girl, face down in the Rio Grande, clinging to her father's neck.

I'm afraid to face the degree of loss this world apportions to some people. Be of good cheer, Jesus says, for I have overcome the world. Well, what if that's not true? Transcend! Leave the dishes on the table! But that's exactly what the prophetic tradition says we're not allowed to do: transcend not! You are required to confront the degree of loss this world imposes on so-called children of God, like you.

I hoped seminary would teach me how to make that text say what I want to hear — the Amos text, and the Mary/Martha story, and of the parable of the good Samaritan. I hoped seminary would teach me how to hold the prophetic tradition up against the world the way I first held up that line against my mother at the age of seventeen: Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things. But one thing is needful. Mary hath chosen that good part, and it will not be taken away from her.

Would that it were true. Would that Amos and Jesus were right. Would that their rightness might deliver me from my inescapable human vulnerability. That's what I've always wanted from that line, from this religion: not transcendence, but deliverance. Get me out!

In my better moments, I understand that getting out begins with me. So in March I went to Arizona to see if I could help some of the people America has pushed into the ditch: Latin American immigrants. American Border Patrol blocks every *road* that crosses out of Mexico, so the ditches into which those people fall are canyons and arroyos so forbidding as to be blocked, in effect, by fear and thirst and pain, which America has deputized. A man named Joshua led me and a dozen other seminary students into one those gauntlets, one through which several hundred people struggle every week, in fear. Over the last ten years, at least a thousand people have died in those canyons, where temperatures rise to 120 degrees. Most of them die of exposure after being separated from their group by a fall, or by exhaustion. Some of them are killed by thieves who want their money or their shoes, and a few are killed by rattlesnakes. A thousand people, in one Arizona county: how much higher might that number be

if it were possible to count the dead whose bodies are not found? In one Arizona county.

We carried forty gallons of water and a hundred cans of pinto beans to a couple of oases in remote canyons, one of which included a shrine to a nameless woman. “We probably won’t see any people today,” Joshua said. “They’re out here — some of them are probably watching us right now, but they hide in the brush when they hear us coming.”

And I’m like, well why would they do that?

I scanned the horizon for places where they might be hiding, the people I had come to help. I should call them out: “No tengan miedo!” I should shout. “A sus ordenes estoy!” I came to pick you up and put you on the mule that I was going to ride. Maybe we could make some kind of uniform for Good Samaritans, I thought, so they’d know who we are. I scanned the underbrush again, and then I realized: they know exactly who we are. Better than we know ourselves.

We unloaded our provisions, and we started back. After walking for an hour, Joshua stopped in the shadow of a cliff to let us rest and think about what we had done. “Would it make any difference?” he asked.

And we were like, “Well duh — that’s why we did it. That’s why we paid all this money to come down here, and hired you to help us find these people: to make a difference.”

He shrugged. It might keep the people in the underbrush alive another day, the particular people who were hiding from us, but it won’t change what makes them come, or makes them hide. For those things to change, we have to change, at the level of thought. He mentioned the common pattern of thought about the universe: that it bends toward justice, but progress is slow, so we have to be

patient. And then he rejected that pattern of thought. “I don’t want to be patient,” he said. “I want to win.”

Well so do I. I want to win. And I imagine you do, too. You see Oscar and Valeria Ramirez floating in the Rio Grande, and you want to win. You hear a hundred thousand voters chanting, “Send her back! Send her back!” and you want to win. You realize that America’s immigration policy is *designed* to send at least a thousand people to their deaths in that one Arizona county, and you want to win.

How are we going to do that? By delivering water and beans to people hiding in the underbrush? By shaking the book of Amos at Border Patrol, or at Donald Trump? By insisting that Amos and Jesus are right, regardless of how wrong reality makes them appear? Clinging to that rightness, as if it alone can save our lives, is killing mainline Christianity. Here’s the thing I want the text to say, and here’s the thing I want to happen in the desert, and here’s the meaning I want the text to impart to what happens in the desert. Theology that lets you line up all those things and say that they mean X, or Y, or Z, as if they were terms in an equation, is a form of self-defense. It will be the end of Christianity.

Twenty years ago, I might have been indifferent to that end. There were some days when I might have even cheered. But I’m tired of disillusion, even if it’s justified. I want to win.

At the end of today’s passage from Amos, God says the kind of famine that will come to disillusioned or indifferent people, or to cheering people, or to chanting people, or to clinging people, is not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but starvation for the word of God. That’s the good part Mary chooses: hear the word of the God, which means stop talking to yourself, and listen. Notice that

we're never told what Mary hears. Whatever Jesus may be saying in the moment Mary stops, and sits, and listens, matters less than the posture she assumes.

Disillusion puts me into a defensive posture — I yearn for deliverance, I hope for deliverance, I hunger for deliverance, while the floating bodies of reality suggest that hoping for deliverance, that the whole prophetic vision, is a pipe dream.

The theologian Stanley Hauerwas has said that resisting the illusory need to resolve the tension between the divine promise and its failure to be fulfilled is the essence of faithfulness. Denying that tension, or theologizing it away, is a kind of idolatry.

Maybe winning starts with Mary's posture, which puts aside my thoughts — about the way the world should work, about the way my help should be received, about whether I'm a person to be feared, about the things the master ought to say. I want the master to tell me that the world is like the story of the world — the glorious prophetic vision — but it isn't. I want God to deliver me from chants and cheers and floating bodies, but God commissions me instead. That means God treats me like a subject, not an object, which is awesome to consider in itself.

You want me to pick those people up and put them on my mule and leave my Visa card, as if I had knocked them down?

Yes, I want you to pick them up. Because you can. Because you will. Because that's the kind of person I know you to be. Which is why I love you more than all the so-called rightness in the world.

How I yearn to be known in that way. How I yearn to be loved in that way.
How I yearn to be commissioned — to be called — in that way.

Amen.

