Tatjana Ljujić, *Discipleship as Attending*

Amos 8.1-12
Colossians 1.15-28
Luke 10.38-end

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5th Sunday after Trinity

The story about Martha and Mary in Luke's Gospel appears among the events that take place as Jesus and his followers travel from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Galilee was in the north of what was then Roman Palestine. It was where Jesus grew up, and where much of his teaching and ministry to the largely agrarian communities took place.

Jerusalem lay in the south and was home to the central religious establishment — the Jewish Temple authority — as well as the site of Roman political power in the region. It is there, as we know, that Jesus will be crucified, following his teaching in the Temple area, which challenged the injustices of both religious and political authorities.

I often think of the ten chapters in Luke that describe Jesus's and his followers' long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem as a road movie.

Road movies, as the film buffs among you know, are never simply about travel. More often than not, they also represent a learning journey, a journey of discovery — of those deep truths and larger realities that the busyness and routines of our daily lives sometimes prevent us from seeing.

On the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, through Samaria and Judea, Jesus's followers learn what it means to be a disciple: through encounters, parables, direct instruction…

As in the first part of Luke's Gospel, it is Jesus's ministry to those who are habitually rejected and commonly overlooked through which loving service to one's neighbour is modelled.

But what kind of discipleship is modelled in the story about Martha and Mary that we heard in this morning's reading?

This episode directly follows the story of the Good Samaritan, the famous parable of the expansive notion of who our neighbour is, which transcends the boundaries of ethnic, religious, or geographical identity, and locates the ideal of neighbourly love in those customarily despised and othered — as Mel beautifully reminded us in last Sunday's sermon.

Jesus's exhortation, 'Go and do likewise' [Luke 10:37] — *Go and DO likewise* — with which he ends the Good Samaritan parable, is directly followed by the Martha and Mary story, where the focus shifts from doing to being, from the love of neighbour to the love of God, from action to contemplation.

And in keeping with this shift in focus, the story is directly followed by the episode in which Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer to the disciples.

In the story of Martha and Mary, Jesus's invitation is simply to be — to behold, to listen, rather than to do.

Indeed, incessant doing, as represented by Martha's busyness, can get in the way of our capacity to connect with God — or so this passage seems to suggest.

And this appears to be the case even when the activity is of the good kind. I assume (though the text does not make this explicit) that Martha, in this episode, is occupied with the work of service and welcome — not entangled in the kind of toxic productivity akin to some extreme forms of modern-day capitalism.

Jesus gently rebukes Martha for being distracted by her 'many tasks', while her sister Mary is praised for her attentive presence.

Mary's contemplative attending to what's before her enables her to recognise the holiness of the one at whose feet she is sitting.

It is none other than the Word of God.

Mary beholds none other than 'the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed' [Colossians 1.26] — as the letter to the early Christian community in Colossae puts it, part of which we heard in our second reading this morning.

While Martha is distracted by her ceaseless activity, Mary contemplates God's presence, God's nature, and God's glory made manifest in Christ.

As readers and listeners of Scripture, we are familiar with the myriad biblical stories in which God makes God's will manifest. One hears what God wills, and one does (or does not) act accordingly.

Take the prophet Amos, for example. Amos lived and prophesied in the 8th century BCE, during what historians believe was the longest period of peace in Israel and the height of the nation's economic prosperity — before the devastation brought by the Assyrian onslaught that eventually destroyed the Northern Kingdom.

This era of peace and affluence, however, had its shadow side: grotesque injustice and inequity between the urban elite who owned the land and those who laboured on it.

This angered God, who, as we heard in our first reading, spoke through the prophet against those who 'trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land' [Amos 8:4].

Not only did they exploit and oppress their poor neighbours, but they also forgot their covenantal duty to God, who had liberated their ancestors from the hand of

the Egyptian oppressors and had instructed them not to oppress the poor and needy in their own midst.

One of the commandments that sealed the covenant between God and God's people following their liberation from Egypt [Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6] was to rest — to observe the Sabbath [Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15].

Under Pharaoh's rule, the Israelites were forced to labour relentlessly and without rest [Exodus 1:11-14, 5:6-9]. Now, everyone was to rest: the householders and their families, the enslaved who served them, the resident aliens — even the donkey and the ox were to rest [Exodus 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14]. And the land, too, was to observe a Sabbath every seventh year [Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:2-4].

Fast-forward a few centuries — we are in the time of the prophet Amos — and we find God's people emulating their former oppressors: they not only preside over exploitative labour but also engage in ceaseless economic activity, regarding the commandment to rest not as a blessing but as a stumbling block to ever-increasing wealth accumulation.

They say, 'When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?' [Amos 8.5].

Such behaviour not only breaks the covenant with their God, who is a God of freedom, but also destroys the communal fabric of a people entrusted with the divine law to establish a society rooted in justice, righteousness, and the duty of care for the weak.

This morning's Old Testament reading is one of those scriptural passages in which God makes God's will known. The divine manifestation, heard through Amos's prophecy, is, in essence, a summons to action: repent, or destruction will ensue. To 'repent' literally means to 'turn around'. A call to repent is both a statement that you are heading in the wrong direction and an exhortation to change your ways.

Notwithstanding the common thematic thread between this morning's Old Testament reading and the Gospel passage — the spiritual and social pitfalls of anxious and ceaseless activity — there is a marked difference. Unlike the passage from Amos, in which God's will is made manifest, the story of Mary and Martha is about God making Godself manifest.

Jesus's visit to the two sisters is an invitation to know God rather than to follow a command. The invitation to know does not exclude the invitation to act. (Quite the contrary, and I'll come back to this.)

It is nonetheless a different kind of invitation — and one that the story of Martha and Mary from Luke's Gospel asks us to consider.

The fundamental belief of Christianity is that God's nature has become manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. God is as God is in Christ and to know Christ is to know God. Christian discipleship rests on the knowing of Jesus. And it is about being before it is about doing.

Reflecting on a different Gospel passage, from John, Rowan Williams, in his book on discipleship, suggests that discipleship is at heart about 'staying' [*Being Disciples*, London: SPCK, 2016, p. 3]; not 'staying' in the sense of passively remaining where you are, but actively seeking, as Mary does, to spend time in Jesus's presence — to 'stay' with the teacher, so that we may come to know who we truly are: God's beloved children.

Though the word 'disciple' literally means 'a learner', discipleship is not an ordinary learning process. The knowledge acquired comes into being not through information exchange but through continued relationship.

Discipleship is about formation. To be formed in the likeness of Jesus's teaching, the disciples need to stay with Jesus, spend daily time in his presence, abide with him, accompany him on the journey.

'Being a "disciple"', writes Rowan Williams, 'is a state of being in which you are looking and listening without interruption' [ibid., p. 11]. Let me say that again:

‘Being a “disciple” is a state of being in which you are looking and listening without interruption.’

And that is exactly what Mary in this morning’s passage from Luke does: she looks and listens, attentively and persistently — something her sister Martha is unable to do, distracted, as she is, by incessant busyness.

Yet, I feel for Martha, and I suspect I am not alone. Faced with so much that needs doing, to choose inactivity intentionally can seem like an act of self-indulgence. That’s what she rebukes Mary for.

In our present moment in history, we face countless crises and injustices that demand action: from the slaughter of the innocents in Gaza and the onslaught of the powerful against the powerless elsewhere in the world — Sudan, Myanmar, Ukraine, the United States — to the environmental degradation that is pushing earth’s life-support systems to the brink of collapse, and the growing poverty and inequity in our own country and city. All this demands action. Indeed, the time to act is yesterday!

Yet I invite you to try and emulate Mary. For actively seeking to spend time in God’s presence, to consciously stop and allow God and yourself to simply be, is not an end in itself. It is not a self-indulgent thing to do. It is not a self-satisfying pursuit for personal enlightenment. It is about letting ourselves be transformed by God’s presence, so that we can see beyond the self, beyond the preoccupations of the ego, and, consequently, act selflessly. Contemplation underscores righteous action.

So, if you are — like most of us appear to be — continuously in Martha mode, I invite you to try to spend daily time (however long or short you can muster) simply *being* in God’s presence: attending to the sights and sounds of God’s creation, listening to your heart, and beholding God’s glory. Let go of the doing for the moment, and simply be, look, and listen.

I hear you: it’s easier said than done.

Jewish-French thinker, social activist, and Christian mystic Simone Weil once described contemplation as a 'non-acting action of prayer' ['Attention and Will', in Idem, *An Anthology*, London: Penguin Books, 2005, p. 234]. *Non-acting action of prayer.*

I know, I know. But please bear with me.

How does one *do* this non-acting action of prayer?

Words fail me, I'm afraid. But where ordinary language falls short, poetry often rises to the task. So let me read you a poem by the Anglican priest, poet, and liturgist Steven Shakespeare.

Please close your eyes, if that feels comfortable for you.

Step aside: let the day breathe.
Look within: let your heart be still.
Listen well: hear the still, small voice,
calling you back to what God has made you to be.

In the middle of all that life offers us
in the eye of all the storms,
we thank you for the gift of this moment,
for the grace of this presence.
[*The Earth Cries Glory*, London: Canterbury Press, 2019, pp. 6-7]

Amen.