

Passionate for Justice

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July 17, 2016

As we begin a new week, we look back on two more episodes of senseless violence and loss of life, in France and, just this morning, in Baton Rouge and our hearts are heavy. We also look back on the purposeful reflection that many in this country have undertaken after the shootings of the previous weeks and our spirits feel a flutter of hope. We hold all those whose lives were lost or affected by violence in our hearts and prayers. And we turn to scripture to find solace and guidance for a way forward in these difficult times.

Today we meet three significant people in scripture who speak to turbulent times and who show us that there is much we have in common with-- and therefore much to learn from -- the ancient people of scripture. The Old Testament reading continues with the prophet Amos, whom we met last week, and today's gospel is the story of Mary and Martha.

The message delivered by Amos is not a consoling one. God is angry. Amos was a shepherd and a keeper of sycamore trees, clearly not one of the priestly or upper classes but an ordinary workingman. He prophesied in the 8th century BCE, bringing a message of divine wrath to the Hebrew people. He lived during a period of change during which political and economic conditions were beginning to change. Robust international trade had brought great wealth to the upper classes but many peasants incurred debt, lost land and possession and were forced into debt slavery. The rich and powerful exploited the poor by legal but unethical means. Listen again to one of God's angry indictments of His people, as voiced by Amos:

You measure out grain with dishonest measures
and cheat the buyer with dishonest scales.
And you mix the grain you sell
with chaff swept from the floor.
Then you enslave poor people
for one piece of silver or a pair of sandals. (8:5-6 NLT)

The gap between rich and poor was wide and growing. The system was unfair and unjust. In our own time, we might say that the one percent prospered by exploiting the 99%.

Abraham Heschel, scholar of The Prophets, explained the context for these words in this way:

There is a living God who cares. Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is a divine concern. What obtains between God and His people is a relationship of mutual concern.

When we ignore injustice, when we don't hold up our end of our relationship with God, we let God down. God's disappointment in us must be profound.

The Gospel is a familiar, well-loved story about Martha and Mary. On one level, this is a story about conflict between sisters, Mary and Martha, one of whom is doing all the work to prepare dinner and make their guest comfortable, and one who is engaged in discussion with the guest. Anyone who has a sibling might recognize the characters—the one who does all the work and the one who has all the fun. So Martha, the hardworking one, loses it and complains, not to her sister but to her guest, Jesus.

I don't know what she expected Jesus to say or do but what she got was a gentle rebuke. Oh, Martha, Martha. You are lost in the details and missing out on what is important. Mary, on the other hand, knows what is important and is fully engaged.

On a deeper level, this story is about commitment, about being fully engaged in God's work. Mary has been described as representing "passionate spirituality." What makes her an example is not just that she took the time to listen to Jesus but that she did so by taking risks. She took the obvious risk that she would alienate her sister. A more significant risk was that she considered herself the equal of the male disciples and sat at the feet of her teacher, a bold move in first century culture.

Martha, on the other hand, is not fully committed. She is torn between wanting to offer hospitality – an important act in and of itself – and wanting to hear Jesus teach. As a result, she doesn't do either task with her whole heart.

Learning from Amos, Martha and Mary to me means being passionate about justice. Or, perhaps I should say, renewing my passion about justice.

It is clear to me – and probably to many of you – that there is a strong current of discontent in this country right now. On both the left and right sides of the political spectrum, people feel shut out and let down by the institutions that should support all of us, that the system is rigged against them, that something is just not right in the world. And, we're not doing a particularly good job of talking to each other. Perhaps our hurt and our grievances keep us talking past each other. Nevertheless, it is important for us to keep trying to understand each other, particularly when the subject is racial justice, prejudice, or privilege.

Just this past week, I came to a new level of awareness of how out of balance our world has become when I watched a video created by a Chicago pastor called "Get Home Safely." It is a well-done, two-minute video that contains 10 rules of survival if stopped by police. It is educational because it gives African-American kids

very practical advice about how to behave if stopped by the police, such as be respectful, keep your hands in plain sight, don't put your hands in your pockets, don't run even if you're scared. It is also *chilling* and *heartbreaking* because it is *necessary* in our society to give kids very practical advice about how to behave if stopped by the police.

There is something fundamentally wrong and unjust in a world in which it is necessary for fourth graders to have a primer on criminal procedure to just get home safely. Something must change. Our discussion about race and justice must continue.

This is no small problem and one that will not be solved by blaming one side or the other. Justice is a matter of relationship among all God's people and must be addressed as such.

Bishop Marc has called the deacons of this diocese "to begin organizing lobbying efforts at the city, county, state, and federal levels of government to impact both police use of force and overall gun violence." As I respond to this call, I invite you to join me in continuing the work we started with the discussion of the book, *The New Jim Crow*.

In the meantime, we keep our hearts and minds open to everyone, reaching out to those who may see the world differently. We will pray that in the midst of our passionate struggles for justice and truth, we will encounter one another without hatred or bitterness, and work together with mutual forbearance and respect. Amen.

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