

Summer fruit... It’s delicious, but it does not last long. This week, the strawberries we only recently purchased grew layers of fuzz before we could finish them... Our bananas spotted up, becoming overripe much sooner than at other times. Peaches deteriorate fast. Summer fruit does not keep.

The reading from Amos offered terrible images of judgment for the people of Israel: Summer fruit - the time is now, it’s ripe, and the people of Israel will be like summer fruit, good only for a short season, then spoiled and decaying.... Dead bodies all over... Darkness will come suddenly, and famine... But what kind of famine? Not one like the hunger in refugee camps, but one where folks will hunger to hear the words of the Lord, but no matter how they try, they will not find it, for they will hear nothing.

In other words, God was angry. REALLY upset. Why? The people in Israel, the North, were in a time of prosperity, holding feasts and having lots of grain and wheat to sell. They couldn’t wait for the Sabbaths and holy festivals to be over, so they could get back to selling their goods and making money.

But the people were doing even more than having their hearts in the wrong place. The reading from Amos tells us that they were “trampling on the needy, and bringing to ruin the poor of the land.” The scales were set to favor the sellers, not the buyers. God accused the people of “buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes, and selling the sweepings of the wheat,” which farm owners had been commanded in the Bible (Leviticus 19) to leave as leftovers free for the poor.

You may have heard about the recent riots in Brazil that started because of a small increase in bus fares. It was not just the fare increase, though. It’s the fact that so many live in terrible poverty while the wealthy people and the government spend huge amounts of money to get ready to host the Olympics, etc. They build fancy hotels and stadiums while so many are barely surviving horrible conditions. Enough, already, the poor have cried. Enough!! And in our own country, our Congress recently passed a five-year Farm bill that would give *huge* subsidies to wealthy corporations that buy food (Archer-Daniels-Midland, etc) but NOTHING for the Food Stamp program, which allows families in need to receive an average of \$136 in Food Stamps/month. The message offered through our Congress’ action in this seems to be a hard one: big business rules, and the poor don’t matter.

Have any of these legislators read or heard the Word of God that Amos proclaimed? Amos challenged all who heard him: “The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.” (Amos 8:7)

So what is the message of God through Amos? People, you have taken the prosperity the Lord your God has given you and used it all wrong! You’ve turned your way of living so as to totally defy what God has asked you to do. God has had enough. You will be deprived of RECEIVING God’s Word, and this for you shall be a true famine. *What you ignored when you were comfortable shall become your deepest hunger and thirst!* You have not loved the Lord your God, and this is made obvious by the fact that you have not loved your neighbor!

Professor and former Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the things that made God angry in Amos' day are also much in place in our own society. In her words: "Why is Amos in such a bad mood? Because the rich have used their riches to burden those who will never work their way out of debt. Because the clever have used their cleverness to trick those who cannot think as fast. Because making a profit has become more important than anything else in the land – more important than justice, more important than Sabbath, more important than God." (p. 182, *Home By Another Way*, "Famine in the Land," Barbara Brown Taylor)

Last week we heard about God's call for us to love our neighbor... So why was this reading from Amos paired with the lesson we heard from Luke today, about Martha and Mary, and not with the one from last week, the Good Samaritan? Perhaps to warn us to have a *balance*, to know that faithfulness to God requires that we have a balance of loving others and loving God. The Good Samaritan story tells us to respond to the needs of those around us, to BE neighbor, because being neighbor is part of loving God. The Martha and Mary story seems to say that there are times when we do NOT need to rush around helping out or even doing whatever it is our duty requires; that there are times when we must simply recognize the Word Jesus is giving and stop and sit at his feet. "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46) Listen for God's whisper in your heart, stop and read the Bible's testimony as to God's love and hopes for us. This is a huge part of being faithful.

The people of Israel had not loved neighbor and had lost sight of loving God. Amos declared that God would punish them by depriving them of God's Word. God would not speak to the people any more. This was the kind of judgment where one no longer has even the possibility of hearing that Voice which first called Life into being and which gives us hope and breath all along our way. In fact, it has been suggested that Hell is the only place where there is no possibility of hearing and responding to God's Word, God's presence. ...

In the Gospel lesson, Mary sat there and soaked up every word Jesus had to offer. Martha, on the other hand, fumed! Martha we can touch. We've all "been there," where somebody let US do all the work, when we felt totally taken for granted and perhaps even left out... We've found ourselves being responsible when nobody else seemed even to notice all the load we were being forced to carry. For Martha that day, there was extra burden, for her sister was breaking the laws of the customs of their day. A woman was never to sit at the feet of a teacher; the proper place for Mary that day, according to every bit of their societal standards, was in the kitchen, helping her sister serve their guest.

But like so much of what Jesus brought to us, His presence in that house broke down some of the societal barriers of his day. This woman who should have been serving in the kitchen realized that Jesus was the Word of God, and so she sat there before Jesus. Her ears heard and her heart listened. And Jesus proclaimed to her frazzled sister, "Martha, Martha (saying her name twice was a very tender manner of addressing her in Jesus' day), you are worried and distracted by many things. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." – PAUSE –

A lot of people in Israel in Amos' day were comfortable. They had stopped caring about others and were focused only on getting stuff for themselves. They would not hear the Word of God for their lives. And Martha was so caught up in what she was supposed to do - her duty - that she had no time and could not give herself permission to sit and listen to Jesus. Sometimes it's the same for us.

The following illustration was shared by Lloyd Auchard of California. “It was the first rain of the season and my windshield got worse as I drove. It wasn’t long before my focus was on my windshield and how my wipers were doing. Then suddenly I realized that I was about to rear-end the back of a big semi truck and trailer! We have the same problem in the Church. Whenever we become so preoccupied with our own lives and how we are doing, or with our fellowship and study as ends in themselves, we have mis-placed our focus. We forget what we are really about as Christ’s people and Body.....” (*Parables, Etc., Jan. 1987*) We are called to keep our eyes and focus on Jesus.

People can be hungry in many different ways. We yearn for justice in our courts and in our laws... Justice. Reason. Better life.... We all hope for the safety and well-being of those we love... Many yearn for medical care where the CARE can become a bit more discernable. We hope that stem cell research will be used well, and that it will end up providing help for those with MS, with Alzheimers, with spinal cord injuries, and many other conditions... We hope that our economy will get stronger, so that more jobs will be available..... Many hunger for a change from the loneliness they feel, or for a good relationship with their kids... There are lots of kinds of hunger in life.

So today we have heard two different teachings about God’s Word, but perhaps there is one underlying and very basic message: God’s Word has been given to you and is still being given to you. Do not ignore it because of your greed or your comfort; do not miss it because of all the distractions and pressures of your life. Respond to it according to each situation, and realize that failure to do so will end up causing a famine in your own life. You will not hear the Word of the God who has given you life and can give you new life unless you attend to it today.

Remember also that faithfulness has various facets. There is a time to speak and a time to listen... Be neighbor, but also be attentive to the presence of God in your life in solitude. Read the Bible, and pray that God will help you understand what it means for YOU and your life in this world.

The Word of God tells us this: No matter who you are, how old or young you are, how many wonderful or really bad things you have done in your life, God loves you. God has a Word for you to hear, and God is asking you to be faithful... “Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.” Just about every aspect of life is covered in this Word.

Jesus as the Word of God in human form had special concern for the poor, the powerless, and the left-out in society, so I share a reflection of Fred Craddock, professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology. “One of the best sermons I heard from one of my students was offered by a young woman who didn’t have a church or a place to preach. So she went over to Wesley Woods, a little place for elderly people that had three levels of care, and they let her have a Sunday afternoon service once a month. One Sunday she asked me to go hear her preach so I could evaluate her preaching for the class. That day, she chose her text from Luke 18, the mothers bringing children to Jesus, “Let the little children come unto me.” I was surprised by her choice, since the average age of those in attendance seemed to be about 117. Children?

“But this is what she did. She said, ‘I still cannot get over the fact that Jesus’ helpers, the twelve disciples, said, “Don’t bother Jesus! Get the children out of here.” In some ways, I can understand... I

mean, they make noise. They have to be cared for. Sometimes you have to get up and leave with them. They take everybody else's time. Besides that, they can't give anything; they can't teach a class; they can't sing in the choir. They're just, you know, they're a burden. I understand that. But Jesus said, "Leave them alone, let them come to me." That's the kingdom, people.' And those old people just nodded – 'That's right, that's right.' She never mentioned elderly people, but they heard the word. They understood. That's the kingdom, people, and we are *all* included." (Adapted from *Craddock Stories*, p. 148)

If we will hear and receive God's Word, and let it direct the way we live our lives, there will be no famine, for we will walk with God and hear his Word for us. And our lives will be spent, shared, and renewed as we are fed and led to feed others through this Word. May it be so! In Jesus' name, Amen.