

AMOS 8:1-12(p. 687/911)

JULY 17, 2022

LUKE 10: 38-42 (p. 773/1028)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

We strive to know you better Lord. Our heartfelt desire is to understand your Will and your Ways. So, we seek, once again, Wisdom from your Word. Guide our thoughts and our actions as we study together—as well as our words, as we teach and admonish one another. And please, fill our hearts with your Holy Spirit, so that all that we say and all that we do, will be pleasing in your sight. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

“HUMAN DOINGS”

I'm tired! Pooped! Completely spent! And I'm tempted to blame it on old age. Or iron-poor blood. Or the fact that all of the iron in my blood has turned to lead, and settled, well, where it shouldn't have! I could point to a lack of vitamins, or an unbalanced diet, or an obvious lack of exercise. I might chalk it up to environmental causes, you know, air pollution, or sugar substitutes, or that sticky wax buildup on Linoleum floors! There are lots of excuses, really, for why I'm tired! But the truth is, I know the reason why! I read about it in an article the other day.

It said there are three hundred and eighteen million people living in the United States. That's 318 million potential workers. 114 million though, are on Government assistance, and another 87 million are retired. So, there are actually only 117 million people to do all the work! 51 million of these are currently in school, grades K-12. And another 26 million in college. Therefore, there are actually only 40 million people to do all the work.

26 million, work for the Federal Government though, which shouldn't need elaboration. And 4 million are currently serving in the military, and therefore busy elsewhere. That leaves only 10 million people to do all the work. But another 9.8 million of these, work for State or Local Governments. Again, no need to explain. That takes us down to only 200,000 people to do all the work. Out of which 188,000 are currently patients in Hospitals, and another 11,998 are locked up in Prisons. So, there are really only two people to do all the work—you and me! And you are just sitting there, listening to a sermon!

I wonder if that's how Martha felt? She, and her sister Mary, have house guests in their home, just outside of Bethany. The famous Rabbi and Teacher Jesus, a close personal friend by the way, has come to town from way up north in Galilee! And the sisters, of course, have welcomed Him with open arms! Most of you know the story, right. And most of you probably remember that Hospitality is a really big deal in the First Century world. Guests have to be fed! Cold water has to be brought in from the well! Peace, and a comfortable place to rest, simply must be provided! It's not an option! It's a given! Blatant Hospitality is not only the norm, it's a mandatory social obligation!

And notice that Jesus is not alone. The text says His Disciples are with Him. Apparently, He has brought an entourage to town. At a minimum, there are thirteen house guests to feed and entertain. Imagine! But Luke often uses the word "Apostles" to describe the Twelve, and the word "Disciples" to refer to everyone who follows Jesus. So, it's quite possible, extremely likely even, that a large crowd has gathered in Bethany!

Now add in the fact that Jesus is no ordinary guest. Besides being a famous, and sought-after Teacher—besides all the miracles that have taken place, just recently in fact—on top of all news about Him that would have spread like wildfire throughout the entire region—this is the guy who raised your brother Lazarus from the dead! Not that long ago, actually! He spent three days in the tomb, remember? He was dead and buried! But then Jesus resurrected him, called him forth!

Your guest is special! To say the least! Very special! To you, and your entire family! To everyone in and around Bethany! You're entertaining a celebrity! A man of extraordinary Faith! And for those who have eyes to see, Immanuel, God with us! A proper reception is simply required!

I'm sure you can picture the scene. And to some degree, maybe even relate to it. I mean, how busy are summers here in northern Michigan? I'll bet you can you imagine a crazy schedule, packed with things to do! Kids have to be pick up from camp, or dropped off at sports activities! Bills need to be written and mailed! Cherries have to be shaken, for heaven's sake. And then hauled off to the Processor!

And into that, guests showing up for the weekend! Imagine having to clean the house, stock the pantry with groceries, cook all the meals, and then clean up! It's all important, right? It all has to be done! And you, Martha, are the only one doing it! You can probably see why she asked Jesus, to tell Mary to help.

Now I'm a Martha, so I'd be livid! At least internally. How come Mary is just lounging around at the Master's feet, fawning on His every word? Why is Martha the only one scurrying about, setting the table and preparing the food, running to get the water, while Mary just sits on her rear end, talking with Jesus? And why is it, that Martha is the one who gets scolded by the Lord? I don't get it! Isn't Mary the lazy one? And yet we hear, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed! Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her!"

Again, we know the story. But don't you see anything wrong with this picture? How can taking care of those who are dear to you be a mistake? How is preparing for the party, and then later, picking up all of the leftovers, a bad thing to do? Tell me Mary, you were raised by the same mom I was! What's wrong with being of service to others, together? Why not work on the mundane, menial tasks as a team, so that our guests can enjoy themselves? Why not lend a helping hand, giving a little comfort and care to those we love? I don't get it! Again, though, I'm a Martha! A Type "A"! Some would say a "Workaholic"! I often tend to way overbook, and then run around trying to catch up! It hit me the other day when I stepped on the scales while brushing my teeth, just to save a little time!

We know the story. And we know the lesson. But that doesn't always help, does it? I actually prefer running around making sure that everyone else is happy and comfortable. I enjoy keeping the glasses full, and the dirty plates picked up. I want everything to be just right! And I know a lot of you do too! I get it!

But what happens when we let all the “things”, cause us to miss out what’s really important? What if, instead of sitting down and talking with my mother-in-law at Thanksgiving Dinner, I make sure that all of the turkey and stuffing gets put away? What if, instead of visiting with my daughter, and finding out what is happening in her life, I only play with my grandkids? You know, so that she can get some well-deserved rest?

What if, instead of working on relationships with people, which is crucial if you are going to have relationships, what if I diligently attend to all the hospitality issues, so that everyone else can have fun! I’ll tell you what happens! I will slowly, yet subtly, start to shift from a “Human Being” to a “Human Doing”, and miss out on the “better part”?

I mean think about it. When people come to our homes, or to our Churches even, and we busy ourselves doing things for them—and in the process, fail to spend time with them—aren’t we, and they, really missing out? And if we scurry about when we are in the Presence of the Lord—the Lord of our Lives, the One who actually raises people from the dead—instead of sitting at His feet, listening and learning, aren’t we completely missing out? Even if we are scurrying about in service to Him, or in service to others in His Name aren’t we, like Martha missing something critical, something vastly more important?

Listen to a haunting statement by Jesus Himself, from Matthew 7:22. “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your Name, and in your Name drive out demons, and in your Name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

We might accomplish “many things”! We might even accomplish many things in Jesus’ Name! But at what cost? Are we losing out on “what is better”? How many Sunday mornings have you spent rushing around, getting ready for Church, only to arrive at the House of the Lord frazzled? How often do you have a job to do—preparing music, or a Sunday school lesson, or a sermon—only to lose track of why you are doing these things in the first place? Isn’t that actually losing what is better?

How many times do you get communion ready, or light the candles, or read through the announcements, and make sure to talk with everyone on your to-do list, but then completely miss the Presence of the Lord?

Oh sure, the plants are watered, and the hall is swept clean of the crumbs, the coffee is all set up, and your Children’s Sermon went great! You nailed the Communion Prayer! There were plenty of cups in the Communion trays! You said “hi” to everyone, signed up for the BACN drive, grabbed your list for Vacation Bible School! You’ve done all the things! But did you Worship? Did you humbly bow in prayer? Were you still, in the Presence of the Holy God, the One who raises people from the dead? Or did you miss the better part?

Many years ago, at a Clergy Conference, the Speaker asked if we Clergy were actually able to Worship on Sunday mornings, given all of the details, and all of the things, and all of the people we had to worry about. The answers were pretty telling. And the question has stayed with me.

But that question applies to Choir and Praise Team members too, to Elders and Worship Leaders, to Sunday School Teachers and Fellowship hosts, to Diaconate Preparers and Diaconate Servers, too all those who do things around the Church! It applies to those who are distracted by what comes next, by lunch plans or tee times, by appointments and agendas. It applies to those who are distracted in any way, by home things or work things or family things! Are you truly letting go of yourself, Martha, and all of the things, and Worshipping the Lord with all of your heart? That's the question before us!

Let's be honest! It is often easier to do for others, or even to do for God, than it is to sit at His feet and be still in His Presence. It is sometimes more comfortable to pray together, out loud, than it is to pray silently and alone! Like when you first wake up in the morning. Or just before you go to sleep. Or in the middle of a very busy day! It is usually far easier for most of us to give our time, and our energy, and even our money, than it is for us to open up our hearts to the life-changing Presence of Jesus Christ! But isn't that the better part?

But again, I'm a Martha. I want you to notice though, Mary, that Jesus is not rebuking Martha for doing her works of service. He never once tells her that what she is doing is wrong! He just says "Mary has chosen what is better", the "one thing that is needed"! All the rest flows from that! "Martha" and "Mary" are actually two sides of the Christianity coin! True Discipleship requires both being and doing! But listening to the voice of the Lord comes first! Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and soul, and strength, and mind, like we talked about last week. And "then", love your neighbor as yourself.

You know, growing up in the Church, I used to wonder why Mary couldn't just work alongside of her sister now, and then listen at another time. What's wrong with helping in the present, while there is work to be done, and having contemplative reflection at Jesus' feet later? Why not get the "things" done first, together even, and then together take quiet time with the Lord? I mean there isn't any hurry, right?

Then I realized that Jesus is heading to Jerusalem here in this text. Time is short! According to John 12, it's six days before the Passover. Jesus is on His way to the Cross, to the Passion. He is about to leave this world and step into the next, to sit on the Throne of Glory! In reality neither Martha, nor Mary, have unlimited time. They just don't realize it yet! And the clock is ticking for the Apostles and Disciples as well! And for all those who believe! The time to listen to Jesus is starting to grow short for all of us! And if you doubt that, take an honest look around!

Amos says, "The days are coming," declares the Sovereign Lord, "when I will send a famine through the land—not a famine of food, or of thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea, and wander from north to east, searching for the Word of the Lord, but they will not find it."

"The time is ripe for 'my people, declares the Lord!" "My people"! He is not talking about non-believers here, is He? He is talking about us! He is talking to us! The songs in the Temple are going to turn to wailing for us! The sun will darken at noon for us! And all of the religious feasts will turn into mourning for us!

All the things that we normally count on will one day be shaken to their very foundations! So, if we are smart, we'll get our priorities straight, while we still can! Because the days are coming!

So, what "better part" are we missing out on, because of busyness, or distractions, or simply because we don't prioritize what's really important. What "better part" are you letting slide?

I read an article, way back in Seminary, in *Psychology Today*. The author was Scott O'Dell, I believe. He wrote about the Prince of Granada, an heir to the Spanish throne, who was arrested and tried by the *Royal Audiencia* simply because he might someday aspire to the throne, and usurp those in power. The Prince was tried and sentenced to solitary confinement for life in one of Madrid's oldest and most infamous prisons, the Place of Skulls. And just before they sealed the door, he was given a Bible.

Now the Prince must have read that Bible hundreds, or even thousands of times, because when he died, after thirty-three years in the Place of the Skulls, his jailors found that the walls of his cell were covered with a series of bizarre notations. What would a man write after a lifetime of reading the Bible, in hours of loneliness, and terror, and boredom, and fear? What profound reflections would he scratch into the stone walls of his cell, inspired by the greatest book known to man? What were these truths culled from the hope and wisdom of the Scriptures?

What the jailors found was this:

The eighth verse of the ninety-seventh Psalm is the middle verse of the entire book.”

Ezra 7:21 contains all of the letters of the alphabet, except the letter “J”.

The ninth verse of the eighth chapter of Esther is the longest.

The thirty-fifth verse of the eleventh chapter of John is the shortest.

No word, or name, of more than six syllables can be found anywhere in the Bible.

In the insanity of his imprisonment, the Prince had become so caught up in the details, the details of Scripture even, that he missed the very center of God’s Word—the Presence of God, the love of God, and the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ! That bears repeating, because it often applies to each one of us. In the insanity of his imprisonment, the Prince had become so caught up in the details, in the details of Scripture even, that he missed the very center of God’s Word—the Presence of God, the love of God, and the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ!

Why, Martha, do you let yourself get so distracted by all the many things? When in truth, only one thing is needed? And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we thank you for always being present in our lives. And for always being there when we reach out to you, and always there, even when we do not. We thank you for loving us so much, even when we let ourselves get distracted by all the things. And we thank you for always being faithful! Help us now to do the same.

Lord, we have just offered our silent and contemplative prayers, coming to you humble and alone. Privately, we have each turned over to you the things that are too heavy for us to bear by ourselves, and thanked you for the Joys that are flowing from our hearts. We have placed our Cares and our Concerns into your strong hands, and lifted up the Blessings that you have shared. And for this opportunity to kneel in your Holy Presence and reflect on your Grace, we indeed give you our heartfelt thanks.

And now Lord, we shift from our private focus outward, to include the Cares and Concerns of your Church, and of your World. So, we pray for all people everywhere, and ask that you will help them hear your Voice calling to them by name. We pray that the Gospel of Jesus Christ will be spread throughout the world, and that many, many souls will receive Him as Lord! And we pray for Healing, the Healing of Hearts, the Healing of Nations, and the Healing of your Church throughout this world! We pray for those in the Body here at Blaine, and for our friends and family members. Indeed, we pray for all those who need your Loving Arms wrapped around them right now.

We lift up especially..... We ask for Comfort and Strength, Lord, for Healing and Support. We ask for the Gift of your Holy Spirit poured out on your Church and on your People, making us your Witnesses to the ends of the earth! And we ask all this in Jesus' Name, as we pray together now the very prayer that He taught us, saying, Our Father.....