

## Crossing the Line

Wayne Waibel – 07/17/2022

It's a tiny little Gospel lesson today. One that has been misinterpreted for centuries and used to justify the preference of a contemplative life over an active one in the performance of one's Christian faith. It has also been mistakenly cited in supporting the relegation of women in the church to be either assigned to kitchen duty or as listeners only.

Throughout history there are countless examples of shortsighted, far-flung, and generally off the mark assessments when it comes to interpreting different episodes of historic significance.

So what is Jesus referring to when He tells Martha that Mary has chosen "that good part?" Is it the decision to listen to the Master's words rather than help her sister with the hospitality? Or is it the focus on Jesus' words as opposed to His comfort?

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Long before Jesus paid a visit to the family of His dear friend Lazarus, Amos was once again speaking truth to power. This time the situation was grave. God had had enough of the corruption and outright thievery that was running rampant in the northern tribes of Israel.

He was not at all interested in correcting the behavior anymore. The message He was giving Amos to deliver was in essence an indictment and subsequent sentencing.

Nothing ticks God off like stealing from the poor. You'd think that men in positions of power would either know better or at least have a little compassion for those less fortunate. But over and over again, the tendency of power to corrupt is made manifest and can infiltrate even the most well-meaning souls.

And the punishment this time is not hunger and thirst, but a complete absence of the Word of God. That means no reference to the Law and the Prophets. Nothing to be reminded of that comes even kind of close to hearing the Word of the Lord. All because the rich wanted to be richer – and their method to achieve that was to make the poor even poorer.

And this is precisely where the Colossians are headed, prompting today's epistle reading from among Paul's letters. They, too, need to be reminded of what it means to be a believer in and more than that, a follower of Jesus Christ. To be a person of faith is to be dependent upon and tethered to the righteous judgements of God.

While the Colossians are arguing with each other over what constitutes good theology, they have completely missed the truth that Christian theology is concerned with everything. Not just parables, or laws, or protocols – every single thing.

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This seems like a good place to remind everyone that we serve a God that not only created the world in which we live, but attends to it and the people He created to inhabit it continually.

We do not engage in worship on Sunday only. We bring that praise and that worship home with us, and infuse it into our lives all week long. We are actively involved in the practice or theology of our religion constantly. And it is our pleasure to do so.

There is no shortage of current examples that highlight what Amos was talking about in the early eighth century BCE. We in the United States have enjoyed a couple decades of prosperity, but it has not been a prosperity enjoyed by all.

An unfair tax code has literally enabled the rich to get richer and the poor to become poorer. It's been tough on the middle class as well. They have seen their gains in salary and benefits get swallowed up by taxes to the point that many of them have slipped below the income level that made them part of the middle class.

We are still engaged in the most expansive war in history and are borrowing from our grandchildren to pay for it. Our politics appear to benefit only those who have economic clout in our society. The poor, the overtaxed and the economically burdened have no advocate – except a righteous God and the prophets who serve that God.

I know that there needs to be a separation between church and state. I also know that there will be those that expect their preachers to stay away from politics and economics. Whenever I get close to that line and wonder am I mixing religion with politics and spirituality with economics, I remember Amos – and I comprehend both the distinction, and the charge.

I remember that Christian theology involves everything, and I understand that politics is responsible for injustice, and economics – inequality. And I am satisfied that I have not crossed the line.

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Paul reminds us that the church of Jesus Christ does not exist for us. We exist for one reason: to proclaim Christ. Because in Christ alone all things hold together. He is our rock and our salvation. What we do and who we are is of less importance than whom we serve and how that service translates.

I don't think that the story of Mary and Martha is an either/or message. Despite the fact that Martha's complaint contains the words me or my three times, she still addresses Jesus as Lord, so she knows whom she is addressing. And Mary's perceived laziness is actually a supreme focus on the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. So in a very real sense, the story of Mary and Martha is more of a both/and message.

The Colossians were starting to come around. They were letting go of their tendency to emphasize the doctrinal protocols in deference to the living Christ and finding their way to a sustained mindset that embodied the truth and the way and the light and the Word.

It's not always easy using a 21<sup>st</sup> century lens to appreciate the challenges facing a first century church, but we do share a lot of the same awareness. What we refer to today as continuous partial attention brought on by the age of the Internet, was known to the Colossians as well – though for very different reasons. And our leaders suffer from the same by-products of power that were firmly in place during the time of Christ, and really – since always.

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Each week I strive mightily to stay out of the way when crafting a sermon. This week was no different except the message was just a few paragraphs long. The story of Mary and Martha does not give me much leeway on either side to stay even smaller in my efforts to allow the sermon to develop without infusing my own words.

At its most basic level – the prevailing strategy when preaching is to use words only as a last resort. I know that sounds ludicrous, especially given the extended play most preachers exhibit from the pulpit, but at its best – a sermon really is very brief. I know a few Baptists that will take issue with that, but that’s my story – and I’m sticking to it.

Leadership is much the same in the sense that the first best quality in all people of power is humility. If you lack the capacity to engage that aspect to leadership fully and constantly – you’ve got no business in that position. And there’s the bitter irony. Most people assume that a strong ego is what’s necessary in order to achieve the kind of power and authority to be, say, President of the United States. And unfortunately – they’re not wrong.

The real kicker comes in the form of that good part. The part that attends to Jesus. In our case – the Word of the Lord. If you focus your attention on matters of the Holy Spirit, I submit – you cannot be steered wrong.

Of course as humans we possess the capacity of flawed behavior, but in terms of intent, that good part cannot be denied. Silence is needed for words to have meaning.

And if you are able to surround yourself with likeminded handlers that understand and appreciate that good part, which cannot be taken away – you may have half a chance at establishing and maintaining a righteous portion of humility.

It may be argued that being able to govern and being able to successfully run a campaign are two completely different things, but just once – it would be nice to see a person of honor and humility crossing the line. Amen.