

Sermon preached at Eaglehawk Uniting Church

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Readings: Amos 8:1-12; Luke 10:38-42

There's an ad on TV at present which says "distractions lead to disaster" where accidents nearly happen because a driver allows his attention to be distracted. Amos says the Jewish people are distracted when they come to worship. They sit there waiting for worship to end so they can go back to their businesses where they were overcharging people, making poor people work for practically nothing, and selling poor quality grain. They were coming to worship, but were not allowing God to affect the way they lived. Their life had become separated from their faith. They were like rotten fruit.

Jesus chides Martha for being "anxious" and "distracted" because she has too many things to do, and because Mary is not helping her. Then Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the best part". To some people Jesus sounds as if he is taking sides and saying devotion is more important than offering hospitality.

Yet in many ways Martha reflects the story of the Good Samaritan which precedes this one, where practical love is taught, and Mary reflects the following story, where prayer is taught. Like the Good Samaritan, Martha offers hospitality to the visitors and carries out the Command to love her neighbour. Mary could be said to be carrying out the 1st command to love God with all her heart. Both are important.

Jesus concern is that Martha is anxious and distracted by the many things she has to do. We might say she is driven to distraction, trying to do so many things at once that she gets nothing done. Some Australians might say she is running around like a headless chook. Jesus acknowledges Martha's cry for help but his concern is not that Martha needs Mary's help, but that she is anxious and distracted.

This theme is echoed in Matthew's gospel with Jesus saying "Do not be anxious for your life, what you will eat or drink or wear. Is not life more than food or clothing?" And again, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" "But strive for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness and all your needs will be given as well". (*Matt.6:25-33*)

This bit about being anxious and distracted about all we have to do is a hard word for some of us in the church. Some of us take on more than we can handle at times. Like Martha, the more we focus on ourselves and our problems the more likely we are to forget that it is God whom we serve. Like Amos's Jews, Martha is in danger of separating her life from her faith.

We need to see that Jesus does not call Martha away from her serving, as if that is unimportant. He needs Martha to see that getting meals is not the *only* thing that's important. It is Martha who tries to call Mary away from listening to Jesus which Jesus says is the "better part that will not be taken from her". I think these stories suggest that our activities need to be linked to God's mission and purpose or else our activities can lose their meaning. Like Amos's Jews, Martha risks being so distracted that she shuts God out of her life.

There can always be distractions, even in devotion, prayer or worship. Like Martha, we might have too many things to do. In worship we might be thinking of how much we have to do that day, or wonder if the dinners burning because the preacher wont shut up. Who hasn't found a quiet time of prayer disturbed by distracting thoughts about something we need to do. Like the Jews, we might be thinking of some new scheme to make more money. Or we might be worried about a loved one, who is so ill that's all we can think about. Or we might have so many doubts, we come expecting God to clear all these up for us. We might be boiling with anger over something that is happening in society, and our anger become like a brick wall that prevents God from touching our life.

When Jesus says Mary "has chosen the best part" it doesn't mean we should all give up kitchen duties for the prayer room. But I think it does mean we have missed something very important if we never

have time to love God, and to love the presence of God in ourselves. It's about letting God be at the centre. Bishop Desmond Tutu in his book *Made for Goodness* has God say,
"My heart aches with pity
when you smother joy under the onslaught of busyness.
Then there is barely a minute
to pause and listen for me."

In the Uniting Church we're pretty strong on caring, sharing and doing things but not always good at spending time with God. The mission arm of the church has tried very hard to link worship and mission. Prayer and worship are meant to help us establish or renew our relationship with God. Hopefully when we come to worship we consciously come into God's presence, and open the doors of our life to God's Spirit of healing, purpose, faith and life.

It's very easy to see prayer and worship as tasks we have to do. But what if prayer is not so much about what we do, but about what God does in us? What if prayer is no more than God forming us in God's own image and likeness – God wanting to live in us so we become shaped by God instead of by the society in which we live? What if prayer is the way in which we quit giving attention to all the things we are doing, and let God have a go at doing something in us - helping us to be more loving, peaceful, willing to share the suffering of others, to have a sense of being inter-dependent instead of individuals who live for ourselves. I think that is close to what Jesus says to Martha and Mary.