

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
July 18, 2010  
Running To and Fro  
Amos 8:1-12, Luke 10:38-42

Do you like to do Bible study? Some people love it and some people hate it. Some of the time we read stories like the one about Jesus, Mary and Martha. Other times we read texts like the one from Amos that are a little harder to understand or relate to.

One thing I find interesting to do is to have the group read the scripture out loud to each other. Then ask each person what they heard; what was meaningful, what words brought questions, what stuck in their minds? It seems like each person sees or hears something a little different. What did you hear when we read the Amos and Luke passages today? What I heard loud and clear was the words ‘running to and fro.’ Amos uses them to say that the people have trampled the poor and the needy so even if they run to and fro they will not find the word of God. And I can see poor Martha running to and fro trying to serve all the guests.

Imagine a vase with rocks in it, that appears to be full. You would think that nothing else could be put into it. But what if I pour sand into it and it trickles down between all the rocks to fill the spaces? Now is it full? But what if I pour water in too? Now it really appears full. This is an exercise often used to describe

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Imagine a vase with rocks in it, that appears to be full. You would think that nothing else could be put into it. But what if I pour sand into it and it trickles down between all the rocks to fill the spaces? Now is it full? But what if I pour water in too? Now it really appears full. This is an exercise often used to describe time management. It shows that if we plan and use every minute, we can fit in even more tasks. We can fill up our schedule and accomplish more and more.

But if I have taken a vase and filled it with rocks and sand and water, what do I really have? A vase filled with rocks and sand and water! What purpose can that serve? It is the same with filling up our day with tasks. We can fill it up and squeeze in one more thing each day, we can run to and fro, but what if none of those things are really important? You see, we need to figure out the priorities in our lives, what tasks are really important to accomplish, or we will end up with the equivalent of a vase full of rocks, sand and water.

The people in Amos' time lost track of what was important. Amos said it was to let justice and righteousness flow. Micah, another prophet said, God does not want your rituals and sacrifices, your show of being good and holy. "What does God require of you but to do justly, love kindly and walk humbly with God?"

Jesus was a traveling teacher who focused on what was important in his life. He did not allow his family, home, or material things to distract him from his mission to spread the good news of God's love. He relied on the hospitality of his followers and friends so he could spend his time on what was important for him.

At the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, he finds Martha busy, productive, and complaining. Mary is sitting, listening, learning and clueless to Martha's plight. Note that Lazarus is not helping either but nobody expects him to help! There is a whole house full of guests but poor Martha is the only one running to and fro, missing out the companionship and hearing the word of God. But this story is not about Martha complaining, or her siblings being thoughtless.

This story is about Jesus turning the social customs of the time on their head to point out what was truly important. In Jesus' time, women were considered property and at best servants. They were not allowed to sit and learn or ask questions. They were not allowed the dignity to be full people. Who is it in our time that is told no, that is not allowed dignity?

In Jesus' time, women had to do all the work, all the thankless dirty jobs, the jobs that were beneath men and that would make them unclean for their "higher calling" in life. Who is it in our society that does our daily dirty work and receives little pay or thanks?

In Jesus' time, the system was set up to keep people in their place. If you were a woman, you had no value except that given to you by the man who ruled over you, you were expendable. You had a job and a place in the society, at the bottom of the ladder and the food chain. It did not matter what your gifts and abilities were, what you liked to do, what you thought your passion or purpose in life was. You could never rise above the status you were born into. Who in our world is kept from realizing their potential?

What gifts do you have? What do you really like to do? What do you feel forced to do or not allowed to do? What does life demand you do, but you choose do to with joy?

I have a friend who has a chronic and life threatening illness who has been a real inspiration to me. She almost died, twice and spent months and even years in bed and getting her strength back to walk and work and live a full life again. It was very hard, but she never complains. She takes each day and lives it with joy. So one day I was grumbling about doing my laundry. I thought of her and how she never complained about anything. I realized that I was going to be doing laundry

every week of my life. I could choose to do it complaining and grumbling, or I could choose to do it with joy. I take the clothes out of the drier and smell and touch the fresh cleanness. I do laundry with joy! She challenged me to think about my life in a different way.

Jesus was always doing and saying things to point out, question and challenge the way things were. He pointed out all the self-important people running to and fro. He spoke against requiring people to do things that accomplished nothing, and insisted they be allowed to do the important things.

Mary he said, had chosen the better part. Not running to and fro serving the guests as she was “required”. She chose not to be controlled by the society and give into the pressure of her assigned role. Instead she was looking for what was important, doing what she was passionate about without regret, centering her life on God and what God was calling her to do. This is what Jesus calls us to do individually and as a church. Look for what is important, do what we are passionate about without regret, and center on God and what God calls us to do.

So back to our analogy with the vase, rocks, sand and water. Maybe we have filled out vase up with too many things. It just might be time for us to take some of the big rocks out and decide what really goes in to our lives and our church. Perhaps we are running to and fro and trying to do too much. This can

keep us from focusing on what is really important. Perhaps we even need to empty the whole vase and just put in one thing to concentrate on, together.

Jesus came to set us free. Free from the expectations of society and ourselves, things that make us feel separate from the love of God. What if we emptied out all the rocks and sand and water, everything except God and what God is calling us to do. What if we even got rid of the vase? What if we removed any limitations from God and what God is calling us to do?

Ah, that indeed can set us free.

Our mission statement says it. Celebrate and spread the good news. And the good news is this: God created us and God loves us unconditionally, not in spite of, but because of who we are. And we should love each other that way too. That is why we are here to build the beloved community. So that everyone will know justice, love, kindness, and God's presence in their lives.