

Sermon for Sunday, July 17, 2022  
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*Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing.*

Introduction to Poetry  
BY BILLY COLLINS

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

I don't know if Billy Collins has ever written a sermon, or encountered seminarians learning homiletics, that is, the art of preaching, but I suspect he would have a similar reaction to a certain seminarian who spent the week attempting to torture a sermon out of today's lectionary. As students of scripture, how easily we all fall into the trap of coming to the Word for meaning only, for direction or instruction, to bolster our own biases, to score political points, to win arguments, to serve whatever particular task is currently at hand. When we approach the Word in a solely task-oriented way, we miss the beauty of its sound and sense, its savory fragrance, its honied flavor. Like Collins' students, we may demand academic insight while forfeiting our sense of wonder. But Mary had chosen the better part, which was not to be taken away from her.

The story of Martha and Mary is often presented as a contrast between work and study. Such interpretations present study as the more noble of the two, with mundane labor as something baser, to be valued less. But note that Jesus says nothing about Martha's work. It is only her *distraction* that he critiques. For it is *not* her own good work that leads her to judge

harshly her sister's *also* good work. Rather, it is her *distraction*. In her fretting to provide fitting hospitality to Jesus, she has taken her eyes off the One whom she is serving, and instead become slave to the service itself. This tendency towards distraction is part of the human condition. Perhaps it is an element of original sin. In the case of Martha, the effect of this distraction was fairly small and gently corrected by Christ. At times, however, the consequences of our distractions can be quite dire.

The prophet Amos was addressing a people for whom their own distractions had become deadly. The people of Israel had become so distracted by the temptation of profits, of financial gain, that it had consumed them. They had come to regard the sabbaths and worship that had been gifted to them for their spiritual benefit, as an unwelcome interruption from their commerce. In a healthy economy, an economy of the Kingdom of Heaven, commerce can be a means of abundance, can build healthy communities, so that hungry mouths are fed, naked bodies clothed, and the homeless are protected from the elements. But the economy of Israel had strayed from this holy model. The nation had become so distracted by the drive for profit that it resorted to deceit and exploitation and enslavement. In their ambition to accumulate more and more wealth, the wealthy had become distracted from the right and Godly purpose of such commerce, which is to build a healthy community. Commerce and profit had ceased to become a means, a tool for building up and securing the people, and had become the end itself, even at the price of consuming the very people it was meant to serve. They had taken their eyes off the ones they were meant to serve and had instead enslaved others and themselves to the economy itself.

Their distraction was so great that would bring about famine—not of food or water—but of hearing the word of the Lord. Note what Amos does not say. He does not say that there will be a famine of the words of the Lord. The basket of summer fruit is still there, still full, still abundant. But rather, this is a famine of *hearing*. It is as though they were starving when there was a banquet already set out before them. A feast of God's word was right there, ever present, yet they were too distracted to partake.

Our world today is no less prone to destructive distraction. We see the archetypes of this all over: the father so driven to provide for his family that he is consumed by his career to the neglect of the very family for whom he works so hard, the parents so desperate to protect and discipline their children that they snuff their natural curiosity and wonder, the political parties so focused on building an ideal government that they divide and demonize the very people whom that government is supposed to be *of* and *by* and *for*. Even the Christians who would use Scripture as a weapon to attack people over points of doctrine. When our work and discipline and piety lose their proper focus, when they become unrooted from their center in God, then work becomes drudgery, governance becomes tyranny, and scripture ceases to be good news.

As humans, we cannot help being prone to this sort of distraction. We each must ask ourselves what is it that is distracting us from the One thing that is needed. It is part of our makeup, our finite nature, something for which we need a savior. This salvation comes to us time and again, a banquet ever before us, in Christ, "the image of the invisible God," as Paul says. The incarnation recalls us from our famine of hearing, brings us back to our center, saves us from our distraction to reorient us to the One thing needed. In our act of communal worship,

we are shaken from our distracted tendency to make idol of the *what* and the *how* and return our intentions to the *why* and the *for whom*. That intense remembering, the reawakening from our distractions, echoes throughout the ages in the Mass—a communal feast of Word and Table. That great awakening meets us here and now, in this moment of the Eucharist. From there it overflows into our daily lives, into our families and communities, our work and our study and our rest. Choose ye the better part. It will not be taken away from you. Amen.