
Luke 10:38-42 – Martha and Mary

³⁸ As they continued their journey he entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary (who) sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. ⁴⁰ Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me.” ⁴¹ The Lord said to her in reply, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. ⁴² There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her.”

Commentary

Our pericope (story) has an immediate context:

- Jesus sending out on mission the 72 other disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God
- A scholar of the Law who quizzes Jesus, who in response tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, asking who acted as neighbor?
- Our passage herein, the oft told story of Martha and Mary
- Immediately followed by Jesus teaching his disciples to be persistent in prayer

Two weeks previous we studied the pericope of the 72 other disciples who were sent on mission and returned praising God. ²³ Turning to the disciples in private he [Jesus] said, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. ²⁴ For I say to you, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.” (Luke 10:1-10,12-17). Jesus has thanked the Father for hiding “these things” from “the wise and the learned” (v.21). Last week a “scholar of the law,” whom we would think is wise and learned, comes to test Jesus. In response Jesus tells a parable (the Good Samaritan) in which other wise and learned men, religious leaders of Israel “see” the man in the ditch (vv. 31-32). The question is will they “see” what Jesus desire to reveal to them or will it be hidden from them?

This week we have the well told pericope of Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus whom Jesus will raise from the dead. An interesting contrast is presented with these two texts. The lawyer asks, “What must I do? (v. 25) and he is told twice to “do this” (*poieo* v.28, v.37; the present tense in Greek would mean “continuously do”). This emphasis on “doing” could easily become the busyness of Martha. This busyness is in contrast to the continual listening of Mary (v.39). In both stories there are unexpected actions — a Samaritan who cares and helps a Jewish man; and a woman who sits as a disciple and listens and learns. The Samaritan is told to “go and do likewise,” while Mary is praised for not going and doing, but rather being present and listening. Looking at these stories together, it suggests that the contrast is not between doing and listening, but between being anxious and not. Green (*The Gospel of Luke*) notes in a footnote (p. 436) that the contrast is not really between Martha’s doing or service and Mary’s listening, but between “hearing the word” (namely, discipleship) and “anxious” behavior (namely, the antithesis of discipleship).

Culpepper (*Luke*, New Interpreter’s Bible, 231) makes these observations:

The story of the good Samaritan then develops the meaning of the command to love one’s neighbor, and the story of Mary and Martha highlights the overriding importance of devotion to the Lord’s Word as an expression of one’s love for God. The story of the good Samaritan features “a certain man” (v. 30), while Martha is introduced as “a certain woman” (v. 38). The good Samaritan exemplifies the disciples’ seeing; in a similar way, Mary exemplifies the virtue of hearing (see 10:23-24). Moreover, both the Samaritan and Mary, a woman, represent marginalized persons -- unlikely heroes. As a composite, they are model

disciples: “those who hear the word of God and do it” (8:21).

All of the above is a continuation of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem (begun in 9:51) – where hospitality had been refused by the Samaritan villagers. Here in our passage, Jesus and the disciples are welcomed into a home by Martha.

Hospitality in Scripture

Greek: *philoxenia*

The practice of receiving a guest or stranger graciously was common to all cultures in the period of both the Old and New Testament. The word most often associated with hospitality in the LXX and the NT is *xenos*, which literally means foreigner, stranger, or even enemy. In its derived sense, however, the term comes to denote both guest and host alike. Typically, the verb used to describe the extending of hospitality is *xenizein* (Sir 29:25; 1 Macc 9:6; Acts 10:23; Heb 13:2). In the NT one who receives visitors is said to be *philoxenos*, i.e., a “lover of strangers,” or to be practicing the virtue of *philoxenia* (1 Tim 3:2; 1 Pet 4:9; Rom 12:13; Heb 13:2).

The Hebrew Scriptures contain no single word for hospitality, but the activity itself is prominent, especially in the patriarchal stories and accounts in the book of Judges. In these narratives the practice usually illustrates Bedouin traditions having to do with a resident’s obligation to nourish and protect travelers who find themselves in hostile environments. Thus, in Gen 18:1ff. Abraham rushes out of his tent to greet three strangers who approach him “in the heat of the day.” When a feast is set before them, these unknown visitors reveal how God’s promise concerning the son to be born of Abraham and Sarah is at long last approaching fulfillment. By conveying their message, the guests return a favor to their host, thus setting in motion a numinous reciprocity which is typical of stories about table fellowship in the ancient world. (Also see Gen 24:1-49 where God’s will comes to light through an act of hospitality).

Another feature of hospitality that emerges from the OT is Israel’s deep sense of God as its host. Conscious of its formation from descendants of a “wandering Aramean,” Israel knew and treasured its identity as a pilgrim people (Deut 26:5–22), especially during the Exodus journey when it received manna from God in the wilderness (Exodus 16–17). Having taken possession of the promised land, Israelites nevertheless remembered that their home belonged to Yahweh (Lev 25:23) and that they, like their forebears, remained sojourners and passing guests in God’s eyes (Ps 39:12). Precisely as inhabitants of the land, they pictured themselves being led into green pastures and feted at the table of the divine king in the presence of their enemies. The “house of the Lord” in which they hoped to dwell forever was essentially God’s perpetual hosting (Psalm 23; see also Psalm 104 in which God is portrayed as feeding and sustaining the entire creation day by day). When Israel’s prophets looked forward to an era of perfect righteousness and shalom, it was no accident that they envisioned God entertaining the people at an endless feast (Amos 9:13–15; Joel 3:18; Isa 25:6–8). According to Isaiah, this great banquet would be spread for everyone on earth: “*On this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees. . . . He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces. . . .*” (Isa 25)

As pictured by the Synoptic writers, the ministry of Jesus manifests the theme of hospitality in two basic ways. First, Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom is frequently symbolized by images of food and drink, especially at festive meals. Thus the kingdom is compared to a great banquet (Matt 8:11; 22:1–14 = Luke 14:16–24), and Jesus ends his ministry with a ceremonial meal at which words about eating and drinking in the kingdom are spoken (Mark 14:17–25 and parallels). In Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer the petitions for the coming of the kingdom and for daily bread are joined together (Luke 11:2–3 – the passages that immediately follow the pericope of Martha and Mary). Moreover, teaching about the kingdom is implied in Jesus’ pronouncements about feasting with the bridegroom

and new wine (Mark 2:18–22 and parallels), in the promise that faithful servants will be invited to enter into the joy (i.e., feast) of their master (Matt 25:21–33), and in the conclusion to the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20–32). Indeed, the majority of Jesus' parable sayings have to do with the production and use of food and drink or the providing of homelike refuge for God's creatures. What lies behind this body of teaching is Jesus' revelation that God is revealing himself powerfully and eschatologically as Israel's host. The feast predicted by Isaiah (25:6–8) has already begun to appear in the present world order.

It is Luke especially who accents this theme in Luke-Acts. Only the third gospel contains the parables of the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the rich man and Lazarus, the story of Zaccheus, and the Emmaus narrative, according to which two disciples come to recognize the risen Jesus "in the breaking of bread" (24:35). For its part, Acts may be read as a collection of guest and host stories depicting missionary ventures that have originated in circles associated with the earliest churches. Luke's special concern is to show how itinerant and residential believers can support one another in the worldwide mission of the Church. Through this mutuality, he believes, the Holy Spirit will bring about rich exchanges of spiritual and material gifts; and the Church will grow.

Images of hospitality occur throughout the other gospels and the epistles. 1 Peter addresses his readers as aliens and exiles who were once "no people" but are now a "chosen race . . . built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood" (1:1; 2:4–10). As such, they are to "practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another" (4:9). Perhaps the most winsome of all reflections on hospitality by early Christian writers is found in Heb 13:2 where believers are urged to receive strangers graciously on the ground that "thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Clearly the allusion is to Abraham's enthusiastic reception of the three heavenly messengers. But Jesus too may come as a stranger. Matthew, Luke, and John all make this point (Matt 25:31–46; Luke 24:13–35; John 20:11ff.; 21:1–14). And so does the author of Revelation when he records the words of the Risen One to the church in Laodicea: "*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; of any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me*" (3:20). The context indicates that this meal with Jesus, like many of those narrated in the gospels, will be one of repentance and reconciliation.

During the mission of the other 72 disciples, Jesus told them they are to stay and eat in people's homes, as Jesus is doing in our text. Sometimes they and their message will be welcomed (10:5-8), sometimes not (9:52-53; 10:10-12). Martha welcomes Jesus and his group. She demonstrates the proper response of hospitality – of setting food before the disciples, but as Tannehill (*Luke*, 187) notes – in the mission of the 72:

receiving the messengers seemed equivalent to receiving the message. The story of Martha and Mary adds a qualification to that simple assumption: The task of hospitality may actually distract one from the message. Hospitality was very important to the early church, but this story cautions that preoccupation with arrangements can lead one to lose contact with the community's real purpose. This is especially apparent when a woman cannot graciously allow a sister to spend time listening to the Lord's word.

So... in the tradition of Abraham, Martha is the one who offers hospitality to Jesus and his disciples.

The Encounters with Jesus

"She [Martha] had a sister named Mary (who) sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. Mary was listening to Jesus' word or message (logos in the singular) when "Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me."

From the welcome of hospitality we move to this scene. Culpepper simply states it: "Martha presumes

to tell Jesus what he should do; Mary lets Jesus tell her what she should do.” Is that a bad thing? As we shall see next week (Luke 11:1-13), Jesus is clear about the importance of persistence in prayer, e.g., the friend at midnight (11:5-8), the widow before the judge (18:1-8). Telling God repeatedly what we want God to do is not necessarily bad! However, Martha’s words, like the Pharisee’s prayer in Luke 18:9-14, indicate flaws in their motivations.

Green (*The Gospel of Luke*, 436-7) makes some interesting observations:

Though v.38 suggested nothing negative about the nature of Martha’s welcome, it is with respect to her hospitality that she is contrasted with Mary. Here and in v 41, she is characterized as one who serves, normally a positive quality in Luke, but whose service is marked by distractions and worry that conflict with the growth and expression of authentic faith (see 8:14¹; 12:22², 26). Indeed, Martha’s address to Jesus takes an unexpected, perhaps unconscious turn; while she engages in the irony of self-betrayal, her attempt to win Jesus’ support in a struggle against her sister ends in self-indictment. The nature of hospitality for which Jesus seeks is realized in attending to one’s guest, yet Martha’s speech is centered on “me”-talk (3 times). Though she refers to Jesus as “Lord,” she is concerned to engage his assistance in her plans, not to learn from him his.

Perhaps because of her own anxiety about hospitality, her sense that Mary should be helping, her notion that Mary is out of her proper place in this encounter – or some other anxiety – Martha is attempting to “triangulate” Jesus into her inner anxiety and her anxiety about Mary.

Words for Anxiety

Stoffregen notes that Luke, in the short span of two verses uses three Greek words that have similar meanings of inner anxiety:

- *melei* = “do you not care” or “aren’t you concerned or anxious about” v. 40. Jesus is not anxious about the possibility of a late dinner or a simple dinner or even no dinner (he’s already been through the temptation about living on bread only). This is also related to the word used of the Samaritan’s and the innkeeper’s actions of caring for the injured man (*epimelo*). When are our acts of caring proper responses of loving God and neighbors? When are our acts of caring simply busy-work or co-dependency that hinders our relationships with God and neighbors?

Then from v.41 “*you are anxious [merimnas] and worried [turbaze] about many things*”

- *merimnas* (from *merimnaō*) = “be anxious, be worried”. This word includes some apprehension about possible dangers or misfortunes. It is the word used repeatedly in Jesus’ “lilies of the field speech” (Luke 12:22-31 and Mt 6:25-34) where it is presented being entangled in the cares of the world in contrast to having faith, i.e., trusting God. In Martha’s mind it would be a disaster if everything isn’t done just right and on time. Anything less than perfection for her is disastrous and makes her a failure.
- *turbaze* (from *thorubazomai*) = “be troubled, distressed, emotionally upset.” This is the only occurrence in the NT of this particular word, but related terms refer to a “riot” or “loud commotion”. It refers to the commotion (weeping and wailing) and related distress at a death. It refers to the riots the Jews instigated to run Paul out of town. Generally the word group refers to

¹ “As for the seed that fell among thorns, they are the ones who have heard, but as they go along, they are choked by the anxieties and riches and pleasures of life, and they fail to produce mature fruit” (Luke 8:14)

² “He said to (his) disciples, ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. For life is more than food and the body more than clothing.’” (Luke 12:22-23) If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? (Luke 12:26)

the noise that a crowd makes, either as appreciation: “cheers,” “applause;” or the opposite: “groan,” “murmur,” “uproar”. So the word strongly hints at noise besides just the inner turmoil. Don’t we all know people who make sure that everyone else knows about their inner anxieties? Or it could refer to all the demands within Martha, pulling her in all sorts of directions.

Out of Her Proper Place

There are something that are culturally amiss here. First of all, Mary is not in her “proper place” according to the culture. In the gender-based division of space in that culture, it is very likely Mary who is sitting with Jesus in an area reserved for men (whether dining area or “living room” area). Second, it is not clear who is the elder sister here. Since Jesus interacts with Mary here and in John 11, perhaps Martha might have been the younger sister. But since Martha extended the hospitality into “her” (?) home, she is the elder sister.

In the Mediterranean cultural perspective on human activity men are expected to be spontaneous, to react to the challenge, opportunity, or invitation of the moment (see Luke 7:31-35). Women are expected to work, achieve, to be involved in purposeful activity. Mary is spontaneously engaging Jesus when she should be involved in purposeful activity. This can be seen when men are healed in Luke’s gospel, they respond spontaneously and run out to spread the word. When Simon’s mother-in-law is healed, her first response is the measured activity of serving a meal.

Jesus’ positive judgment that “*Mary has chosen the better part*” and his gentle reminder to Martha for being “*anxious and worried about many things*” fits into Jesus’ customary, counter-structural positions. He frequently takes his culture’s second-choice options for either gender, in this case “spontaneous” behavior among women, and urges it as a good alternative to the first choice (“achievement”).

Jesus’ Critique

Jesus doesn’t criticize Martha for her “service,” but for her worries and anxieties about many things – a life that is being pulled in too many directions. As Jesus told Satan during the temptation, we don’t live by bread alone. Jesus doesn’t need an elaborate multi-course feast. Everything doesn’t have to be quite perfect... but neither should we strive for mediocrity or seek to “just get by”.

Perhaps Jesus may be criticizing her for “opposing” his radical departure from the cultural norm by treating Mary, a female, as a disciple. From Craddock (*Luke, Interpretation Commentary*):

If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever. There is a time to go and do; there is a time to listen and reflect. Knowing which and when is a matter of spiritual discernment. If we were to ask Jesus which example applies to us, the Samaritan or Mary, his answer would probably be Yes.

The lawyer in the preceding story was skilled in scripture but had trouble really hearing the Word of God. He is given the example of a Samaritan who does the Word of God; someone the lawyer wouldn’t have expected to properly understand scriptures.

Martha was so anxious about doing that she had trouble hearing the word of God. She is given the example of Mary; a woman who should have been working in the kitchen just as hard as Martha – and Jesus should have known better. Proper rabbis do not let women to sit at their feet and be disciples.

A Reflection

Part of Culpepper’s (*Luke, New Interpreter’s Bible, 232*) final “Reflections:”

In its own way, the conjunction of the stories about the good Samaritan and the female disciple voice Jesus’ protest against the rules and boundaries set by the culture in which he

lived. As they develop seeing and hearing as metaphors for the activity of the kingdom, the twin stories also expose the injustice of social barriers that categorize, restrict, and oppress various groups in any society (Samaritans, victims, women). To love God with all one's heart and one's neighbor as oneself meant then and now that one must often reject society's rules in favor of the codes of the kingdom -- a society without distinctions and boundaries between its members. The rules of that society are just two -- to love God and one's neighbor -- but these rules are so radically different from those of the society in which we live that living by them invariably calls us to disregard all else, break the rules, and follow Jesus' example.

To judge from the story of the Samaritan, Martha should have been praised for her practical service to Jesus. Her action, in fact, is neither praised nor condemned, but she is challenged to consider her priorities. The whole gospel is not contained in loving service to others, no matter how important that is. Christian discipleship is first and foremost personal adherence to Jesus. There must be time to listen to his "word;" devotion to Jesus is the one thing required. This relationship shows itself in loving service, but without prayer, care for others' needs may not be love.

Notes

Luke 10:38 *Martha welcomed him*: Martha appears only here in Luke's gospel. In John 11 she, along with Mary, are identified as Lazarus' sisters

Luke 10:39 *sat beside the Lord at his feet*: it is remarkable for first-century Palestinian Judaism that a woman would assume the posture of a disciple at the master's feet (see also Luke 8:35; Acts 22:3), and it reveals a characteristic attitude of Jesus toward women in this gospel (see Luke 8:2-3). Throughout Luke-Acts, sitting at the feet indicates an acknowledgement of authority (7:38, 8:35, 41; 17:16; Acts 4:35, 37; 5:2, 22:3) ***listening to him speak*:** literally, "listening to his word (*logos*)" The word Luke uses, *logos* is used in NT parlance to indicate the word of God. Mary is thus attentive to Jesus and received him as a prophet who spoke the word of God.

Luke 10:39-40 *Mary who sat...Martha...came to him*: Mary is sitting beside Jesus at his feet. Martha stands over Jesus (a more literal meaning of *ephistemai* in v. 40). While this word can simply mean "to stand near or by," it also carries the idea of "to stand or be over" and even "to oppose". There is a sense that Martha is opposing what Jesus and Mary are doing. Mary should be doing something else -- namely, helping Martha be a good hostess -- doing the proper "womanly" duties.

Luke 10:40 *burdened*: the verb *perispaō* has the sense of "being distracted." This verb combined with the Greek *pollēn* indicates that it was an objective fact she was burdened and not a neurotic obsession on her part.

***serv...serving*:** In the Greek Luke uses the noun and verbal form of *diakonia / diakoneo*. While these words have a meaning of "waiting on tables" or "serving guests," they also became technical terms for Christian service or ministry. The words have been transliterated into English as "deacon" and related terms.

Luke 10:42 *There is need of only one thing*: some ancient versions read, "there is need of few things"; another important, although probably inferior, reading found in some manuscripts is, "there is need of few things, or of one."

Sources

Commentaries

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol. 3 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) pp. 171-76

Jerome Kodell, "Luke" in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) p.957

Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol 3 of *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997)

R. Allen Culpepper *Luke*, vol. 9 in *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN.: Abington, 1995)

Robert C. Tannehil, *Luke* in *Abington New Testament Commentary* (Nashville, TN.: Abington, 1996) p. 187

Brian Stoffregen, "Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes" at www.crossmarks.com

Dictionaries

John Koenig, "Hospitality" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992). Vol.3, p.299

Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995)

Scripture

Scripture quotes from *New American Bible* by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. © 1991, 1986, 1970 available at <http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/index.shtml>