

July 17, 2016

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Luke 10:38-42

### **Sister Acts**

Today's gospel story is short and simple, this story of two women, Mary and Martha, two sisters. One is active and outspoken. Another sits and listens. Then Jesus talks about what's important. Though it's short and seemingly simple, I think it's actually a difficult story.

Perhaps it's especially difficult for women. In the Bible on the whole there are many fewer stories prominently featuring women than men, and then there is this short one, that does feature women, but it seems to pit these two women against each other and praise the one who doesn't say anything. That's one way of looking at this story, but as you may guess, I'm not a fan of that interpretation.

Other interpretations find other things here, find more for women than competition and silence, more for everyone about how to be in the presence of Jesus. These interpretations take a closer look at the things these two women do in this story, at what they do in the context of all of Luke's gospel and in context of the culture from which it emerges. What these women do, what they both do, has important in things to say about the gospel, about who it is for, and how it is embodied and experienced.

Mary—not Mary the mother of Jesus, and not Mary Magdalene... There's not a not a ton of women who are named in the New Testament, but of the ones that are, a lot of them are named Mary—this Mary, Mary the sister of Martha, sits at Jesus' feet, listening to him. When you picture this pose, it is an attentive posture, a quiet posture, a submissive posture. It's not a feminine posture—not in ancient times. In ancient cultures, sitting and listening at the feet of a teacher is position for students—a position reserved for men. Not here. Not according to the gospel. In this story, a woman, Mary, is commended for taking this place, commended for this by none other than Jesus.

Martha does things that are noteworthy as well, and not just the reprimand. All that Martha does is worth a closer look. First off, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home; this story begins with Jesus traveling, and then her act of hospitality. Think of all the other stories in the Bible about hospitality, how important it is, how it puts you in the presence of the holy. We had a wonderful example of this in the first reading today, as Abraham welcomes angels unawares, busies himself preparing a meal for them. Hospitality is a major theme in the Bible as a whole and in the gospel of Luke in particular, a gospel in which Jesus tells many parables of hospitality and meals. An in Luke's gospel Jesus is often at meals, or on his way to and from them, he's accused of being a glutton because of it, and, in the very same breath, taken to task for the company he keeps while eating. Here, in this gospel story, in a patriarchal society, Jesus keeps company with women—women who do the gracious, the holy work of hosting, welcoming, feeding.

Martha, especially, does this work—which she not so graciously points out to Jesus, taking a swipe at her sister while she's at it. Martha's swipe aside, the significance of the work she does may be masked by translation. In the original language of the story, in ancient Greek, the word used for the many tasks that Martha does is a cognate of the word diakonea. Diakonea is a word that is used throughout the New Testament to talk about the work of the church. The

word “deacon” comes from diakonea. In the history of the church, sometimes that role was reserved for men. Not here. Not according to the gospel.

Of course, just like men, women can go about that work in ways that don’t work, in ways that detract from rather than support hospitality, graciousness. Women and men can be busy with many important tasks, so busy we become worried, and distracted, and miss what’s most important. That’s what Jesus reprimands. It’s not Martha’s work that’s the problem, but her worry and distraction, the way they are poisoning her relationship with her sister and preventing her from being with Jesus, the one thing needed.

This, I think, is what actually makes this story most difficult. How do you do that? How do we not worry, or be distracted? How do we do the necessary tasks, gospel tasks of welcome and preparation, and basic necessities of eating, while not starving the soul?

I read a story<sup>1</sup> recently that described how one woman does that. This woman’s name is Heather, and she is a hospice nurse. Heather visits people who are very sick and who are spending the time they have left at home. The article describes what Heather does, the necessary acts of service for the dying, in this way: “Heather is not brisk or efficient, as hospital nurses are. She is purposely inefficient, in fact. Most of the time when she visits patients, she doesn’t have much to do: she takes vital signs, she checks that there are enough supplies and medications in the house, she asks if old symptoms have gone away or new ones developed. If she were rushing, she could do all that in about five minutes, but her visits usually last an hour or more. Sometimes there is a complicated medical situation to take care of. Sometimes she does something non-medical that needs to be done, which is the hospice way—she might sweep up a floor, she might heat up dinner...The idea is to be around longer, to chat, to sit close by, to put her hands on the patient’s skin as she goes about her checkup...”

I read that, and I thought of Martha and Mary. I thought how Heather is one woman who embodies these two women: both getting things ready while also being with, doing and listening, active and contemplative. Here is a one woman engaged in the sister ministries of service and presence—all in service of what is most important. The article said: “Her visit may be the high point of the day for the patient, who may not be able to get out of bed, or for whoever is taking care of the patient, who may not have left the house or seen anybody else for a day or two...”

Heather thinks of what she does “as preparing a patient for the voyage he is about to take, and accompanying him partway down the road.” The article said, “She, like most hospice workers, feel that it is a privilege to spend time with the dying... that working with the dying is the closest you can get on earth to the presence of God.”

That is what Mary and Martha had, that privilege, that very presence. Jesus was there with them. This makes this example and model, hospice, yet more poignant and appropriate. Jesus was on a final journey, and Mary and Martha accompanied him partway down the road. Even as Jesus stopped in homes, he was on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to die. The shadow of the cross fell across every table at which he ate.

Centuries later, we feel that shadow, too. Whether it is with relatives and friends whose health is failing, or whether it is the hatred and violence that is tearing across our country, and other countries, we feel that shadow over us, the shadow of death. The gospel shows us how to be with the dying, the gospel calls us to choose the better part: not to worry or be distracted, but to welcome, to serve, to listen, to learn—and so to live, to live with the thing that will not be taken away from us, to live in the very presence of God.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Threshold” by Larissa MacFarguhar, *The New Yorker*, July 11 & 18, 2016 issue