

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 10:38-42

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The story of Mary and Martha is a classic story of the roles of women. But it is also a source of annoyance to many women. I remember my mother disliked this story because she was a Martha character and she didn't like it that Jesus was critical of Martha. She thought that Martha was doing what women do, and he ought to be positive toward her. I remember other women talking about the story saying that Jesus needed to learn something from Martha. There will probably be women in the congregation wherever this story is told who will identify with Martha. That's just fine because that's what the story is structured to do.

My hunch is that this may be a Jesus story that was told by women. If there is a woman in the congregation who can tell the story, that would eliminate some of the unfortunate gender dynamics that sometimes get associated with Jesus "putting down" Martha. Nevertheless, there is anticipation of the conflict at the outset and a certain delight in that anticipation.

The mnemonic structure of the story is relatively simple. It's three short episodes. The first episode is the setting, given in two sentences: "Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he was saying." In these two sentences we are introduced to Martha and Mary. Martha welcomed Jesus; Mary sat and listened to him.

The second episode is about Martha. The NRSV reads, "Martha was distracted." This is not an accurate translation, as I'll explain later. The Greek word means fretting, it means being worried. "Distracted" implies that she wasn't doing what she should be doing. There's no implication of that in the Greek. She was working hard trying to get the dinner together.

Martha came to Jesus and she was ticked. She describes the problem: "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?!" In conveying the description of Martha's situation and her attitude, I would not hold back from a full expression of anger. She's really ticked, so don't make this pious or nice or some kind of detached comment. Express her anger at her sister and at Jesus. But Martha goes beyond description to accusation. She even has the arrogance to tell Jesus what to do as a guest in her house: "Tell her to help me!"

The third episode is Jesus' response: "Martha, Martha, Martha, take it easy." He responds to Martha and then reflects on Mary's behavior. Thus, the last episode has the same structure as the beginning one, first a note regarding Martha, then one about Mary: "Martha you're worried and anxious about many things. Mary has chosen the better part

which will not be taken from her." The story begins in a place of calm, grows in tension until the climax of Martha's anger, and then comes down back to a place of peace and calm.

I really like Joe Fitzmyer's commentary on this story in the *Anchor Bible Commentary* and so I'd recommend it to you. Part of what I'm going to advocate here is based on his commentary. He translates the word in Greek which is translated by the NRSV as "distracted" as being "preoccupied with the details of serving," rather than "distracted by her many tasks." And later, that "she was fretting and disturbed about many things," where "many things" refers to the many dimensions of an elaborate meal.

In effect Jesus is saying, "You're fretting, you're worried about fixing a big meal. There is need of only one thing, one dish. We don't need to have a lot of dishes here, only one dish is needed." The "one thing" initially means one dish. Jesus is supportive of Martha and is saying, "I don't need an elaborate meal; one dish is enough." But he's also supportive of Mary and her desire to listen.

Mary is choosing "the good part." This word can be used for either superlative or comparative things, but the Greek here, *meris*, which is translated as "the better part," is used in the Septuagint for both a portion of food and in a metaphorical sense. So what we have here is a meal metaphor. It could be translated as "Mary has chosen the better dish," a metaphor for choosing to listen rather than to work on a big meal. Jesus is saying: "Martha, Martha, Martha, you're worried and fretting about fixing a big meal. There is only need for one dish. Mary has chosen the better portion of the possible dishes, which will not be taken away from her."

In Fitzmyer's translation, the meal metaphor is maintained throughout the whole story. The story is then less condescending to Martha. It is rather that Jesus is supporting her and opening up another possibility. Jesus encourages both Mary and Martha to learn from him, to become his disciples. Jesus is responding to Martha by inviting her to stop criticizing her sister for wanting to listen and to join her. She can step back from her expectations in relation to how much she has to do to provide him with a meal. She can fix him a simple meal and then listen.

Jesus' invitation to Mary and Martha stands in contrast to other teachers throughout the centuries who would only teach men. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century the students who were taught to read and received an education were primarily boys. Girls were largely excluded from education. The education of girls and women is a relatively recent development and is still resisted in some parts of the world. Jesus encouraged that; he encouraged Mary and Martha to listen to him and to learn from him, in effect, to become his students.

Now the final question is: What would being "taken away from her" mean? It's a strange statement at the end of the story. One saying of Jesus earlier is "To those who have, more will be given. From those who have not, even what they have will be taken away," (Luke 8:18). At the end of the story of the rich fool (Luke 12:19-21) we hear, "This night your

life is required of you and is taken away from you and as for these things you have prepared, whose will they be?" A dimension of the metaphor here is the calculation of what you will have at the end of life. What will be of lasting value, and what will be taken away as having no value? What you have are those things that you've done that are of value, and what you lose is either what is taken away and given to someone else or simply has no value.

This motif is also present when Jesus says, "Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys" (Luke 12:33). This is a reference to things that last and endure rather than things that are here today and gone tomorrow. Mary has chosen the better portion, something that will not be taken away from her but that will endure, namely, learning about the Kingdom of God. This story celebrates a transformation in the role of women.