

*On Serving and Sitting: A Curious, Upside-Down Story
about Discipleship (Luke 10:38–42)*

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Abstract

This sermon presents the biblical text of Luke 10:38–42 and offers a “traditional” interpretation of this text. This “traditional” interpretation hinges (1) on Jesus’ rebuke of Martha (10:41) and (2) on Jesus’ commendation of Mary (10:42). Such an interpretation, however, leaves the almost unavoidable impression that Jesus is ungrateful for Martha’s efforts in doing the “women’s work” and cooking a meal for a large crowd of people. The sermon then deconstructs this “traditional” interpretation as it re-examines the text of Luke 10:38–42, paying special attention to the broader Lukan usage of the key vocabulary here, namely “serve” (*diakoneō*: 10:40a/b) with regard to Martha and “listen/hear” (*akouō*: 10:39) with regard to Mary. This re-examination leads to the paired conclusions that (1) Mary the contemplative will be called to active response to her “listening/hearing” (cf. Luke 6:46–49; 8:19–21; 11:27–28), while (2) Martha the activist—whose “service” reflects nothing less than the “service” of Jesus himself (22:25–27; cf. 12:37)—is even now called to “listening/hearing” as the foundation for her life of activism (cf. Luke 10:42).

Introduction: Hermeneutical Moves

I open this sermon with the observation that “Jesus never fails to surprise” with his healing and his teaching, offering the example of Luke 10:38–42 as a case in point and presenting the listeners with the biblical text, largely NRSV with a few personal retranslations. I suggest that this is a “hot button” text for both first and twenty-first century listeners. And I offer a “traditional” interpretation of the text to support my suggestion. This interpretation, to first appearances, leaves Martha both in the lurch and in the kitchen, doing “women’s work,” while Jesus commends Mary for sitting, motionless and silent, “at Jesus’ feet.”

But I do not take “first appearances” as the final “answer” for this text. Instead, I ask what Jesus meant with his words to Martha and why Luke, alone of all the Gospel Writers, chooses to tell this story. Here I make my major hermeneutical “move” with the sermon. I go back to Luke’s text once again and read it against the broader Lukan context, so far as key vocabulary is concerned: “serve” (*diakoneō*: 10:40a/b) with regard to Martha and “listen/hear” (*akouō*: 10:39) with regard to Mary. This “move” turns the significance of the story on its head. Now Mary discovers that she will be called away from her “contemplation” into active response to Jesus’ words, since “hearing” always leads to “doing” within Luke’s larger story (cf. Luke 6:46–49; 8:19–21; 11:27–28). And Martha—whose “service” reflects nothing less than the “service” of Jesus himself (22:25–27; cf. 12:37)—discovers that she is even now called to the same “contemplation” as Mary, that one “needful” thing which will provide the foundation for her life of “activism” (cf. Luke 10:42).

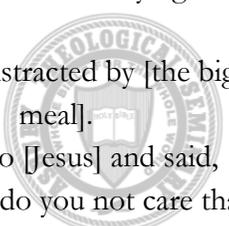
In concluding my sermon, I return to the place where I started: “Jesus once again surprises.” And I call my listeners to “hear the words of Jesus and the story of Luke and discern them rightly.”

Sermon

Jesus never fails to surprise. Everyone. Everywhere. All the time. His disciples. The crowds. His hometown acquaintances. His opponents. Everywhere he goes Jesus amazes people with his healing ministry. And every time he speaks Jesus astonishes people with his stories, his teachings, his proclamations about the kingdom of God. I can't give you all the "chapter and verse" here this morning. That would be a sermon on all four of the Gospels. But check it out for yourself. Jesus is a man who leaves everybody either praising God in joyous amazement, scratching their heads in confused disbelief, or ready to throw Jesus off a cliff.

Our story for today is a very tiny story, just five verses long, Luke 10:38–42. But, if we look at it carefully, this tiny little story packs a powerful—and an equally surprising—punch. Let's listen to the story, as Luke tells it to us:¹

Now as they went on their way,
[Jesus] entered a certain village,
 where a woman named Martha
 welcomed him into her home.
[Now Martha] had a sister named Mary,
 who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what
 he was saying.
But Martha
 was distracted by [the big job of serving a
 meal].
So she came to [Jesus] and said,
 Lord, do you not care that my sister
 has left to me to [serve the meal] by
 myself?



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¹ The text cited below reflects the NRSV except where bracketed. The bracketed texts are my own translations.

Tell her then
 to help me.
 But the Lord answered her,
 Martha, Martha,
 you are worried and distracted by many things.
 There is need of only one thing.
 Mary has chosen the better part,
 which will not be taken away from her.

This is a challenging story that Luke tells us here. This story seems to hit all kinds of hot buttons, whether in the first century or in the twenty-first, at least for women ... or for those men who likewise spend lots of time in the kitchen cooking. Martha is, after all, making dinner for Jesus and his disciples. She has “welcomed” them into her home. They do need to eat. And this is a large crowd of folks. There is lots to be done. And I shouldn’t have to remind you that Martha doesn’t have a twenty-first century kitchen full of useful and time-saving appliances to assist her in making this meal.

So there she is, in the midst of this major first century effort to put food on the table for Jesus and his disciples, cooking up a storm, as it appears. And Mary is just sitting there with the disciples, listening to Jesus, while Martha works her “buns” off in the kitchen (no pun intended). On the “fairness” spectrum, this situation appears to be off the end of the scale on the “unfair” side.

And then Jesus appears to make a bad situation even worse. First he gets on Martha’s case for being “distracted by many things” (who wouldn’t be in her situation?). Then he praises Mary for “choosing [the one needful thing], the better part” and promises her that this “will not be taken away from her.” At first glance we might wish to say, “Thanks a lot, Jesus!” Here he just seems to send Martha back to the kitchen to do her “women’s work” and praises Mary for sitting motionless and

not at all “helpful” at his feet and listening to his words. But is this in fact the story that we are left with?

What is the meaning of this account? And why does Luke, alone of all the Gospel Writers, tell us this story? What could Jesus possibly mean by his words to Martha? And what could Luke possibly intend by inserting this little story into his account of the ministry of Jesus? Is Jesus simply ungrateful for the meal he is about to receive? Is Luke simply a man of his day and his culture who believes that “women’s place is in the kitchen” and that Martha shouldn’t complain about her work?

Well, those might be questions that we can never fully answer. But the text does give us some significant clues in response to our outraged questions (if we are in fact outraged by this story). Let’s go back and examine the text a bit further and see what we can observe.

Observation #1. Martha is the active woman in this story. First she “welcomes” Jesus into her home. And then she does what any good, self-respecting Middle Eastern woman will do when she has guests in her home. She “serves” her guests. In Luke’s Greek text he tells his readers that Martha is focused (well, distracted, if you will) by her “great service.” I took the liberty to retranslate this phrase as “the big job of serving a meal.”

Hospitality to guests is the heartbeat of Middle Eastern women, whether back in the first century or still today in the twenty-first. Back in 1995 I visited Peter and Karen [not their real names] for a week when they lived in Damascus. And one evening when I was with them, they were surprised at home by the sudden and unanticipated appearance of a Syrian Orthodox priest (or was it a couple of clergy?), who showed up at their door. I still remember vividly Karen’s sudden and urgent scurry to provide appropriate “hospitality,” tea and who knows what all else, for this guest or guests who showed up at the door. Well, multiply that Syrian Orthodox priest by thirteen and you have the situation of Martha. She is indeed engaged in “serving” her guests.

And “serving” is not the bad word in this story. It could never be the bad word in Luke’s Gospel. “Serving” is, to be sure, what women do in that society. When Jesus heals Simon [Peter’s] mother-in-law (4:38–39a), Luke tells us that “immediately she got up and began to serve them” (4:39b). As Jesus and his disciples are on the road in their ministry (8:1), they are joined by an entire little crew of women who “[serve and keep on serving]” Jesus and his disciples out of the women’s own personal “resources” (8:2–3). Jesus tells a parable about a slave who comes in from a hard day’s work in the field and still, according to first century custom, is expected to “serve” his master a meal before he himself “may eat and drink” (17:7–9).

But “serving” is not only for women and for slaves. The astonishing thing here is that “serving” is also for masters, as Jesus tells his disciples. “Blessed are those slaves,” Jesus says, “whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, *and he will come and serve them*” (12:37, emphasis mine). And if there is any question about his meaning here, Jesus makes that meaning very clear and very personal with his words at the Last Supper:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, *and the leader like one who serves*. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? *But I am among you as one who serves*. (22:25–27, emphasis mine).

No. “Serving” is not the bad word in this story. Jesus is neither an ungrateful nor an unthinking recipient of Martha’s hospitality, her “service.” “Service” is always a good word, as Jesus uses it in Luke’s Gospel. “Service” is what Jesus himself is ultimately about. “I am among you as one who serves.” How much greater commendation could there

ultimately be for Martha's energetic activity on his behalf? Martha has already learned what Jesus' disciples have yet to discover, namely that "greatness" ultimately and ironically resides in "the one who serves."

"Service" is first and foremost Martha's gift to Jesus. This is a beautiful gift. And Jesus does not rebuke Martha for this gift. If we read this story in conjunction with lots more stories in Luke's Gospel, we see that Jesus surely enjoys good meals. And this is yet one more good meal. The bad word or words here in this story, if there are bad words here, are the words that have to do with "distraction" and "worry." These are the things that Jesus is concerned about, as he speaks to Martha. "Worry" is a prominent theme in Jesus' proclamation. He warns his disciples "not to worry" about how to "defend [them]selves" or "what to say" when they are put on trial for their faith (12:11). He warns them "not to worry" about the details of their everyday "life," that is, their "food" and their "clothing" (12:22; cf. 12:25). He warns them "not to worry" about "[all] the rest" of those things that ordinary folks worry about from day to day (12:26).

And here Jesus seems to say to Martha, if I dare paraphrase the words of Jesus, "Don't worry about this meal, Martha! It's going to be just fine. And your worry won't make it taste any better. God is in charge of the universe. And God will help you with your cooking, since Mary is just now sitting at my feet and listening. Relax, Martha! Take a deep breath! And don't worry! Your gift of 'service' is a beautiful one just the way it is and even without Mary's help."

Well, that's Martha, perhaps, if we have read this story carefully in the context of Luke's Gospel. And that's **Observation #1**. But then there's Mary ... and **Observation #2**. Mary is not the active person in this story. Instead, she clearly appears to be motionless, seated as she is "at the feet of Jesus" (10:39a). And she is just as silent as she is motionless. Mary says not one word from the start of this story to its conclusion. Mary's only actions here are "sitting" and "listening." This is her profile, a very different profile from that of her sister Martha.

Martha is without any question the “activist” in this account, while Mary is obviously the “contemplative.” And within her 1st-century, Middle Eastern, patriarchal context, Mary is also a genuine anomaly. She is in fact a “rabbinical student”—just like the Apostle Paul, who notes that he has “sat at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3). And this in a world where only men get such a privilege. Mary is an astonishing figure in this story, even if she is motionless and silent.

And Jesus in fact commends Mary for her “contemplation” and, by the same token, astonishingly enough, for her status as a female “rabbinical student” in an unmistakably patriarchal world. “Mary,” Jesus says, “has chosen the better part, [that is, the one thing that is needed], and [this] will not be taken away from her” (10:42). This is a huge commendation, a verbalized commendation, for Mary. Jesus seems to suggest that Mary has gotten it all right. And she has, thus far, it surely appears.

And if we stop too soon as we look at this story, we might well conclude that Jesus has greater appreciation for Mary the contemplative than he does for Martha the activist. And those of us in this room today who are the “contemplatives” might well be ready to pat ourselves on the back and to congratulate ourselves on “having chosen the better part.” But is that ultimately Jesus’ message? Let’s take a look at Mary’s “listening” within Luke’s wider story, just as we did with Martha’s “serving.” And when we do so, we may just find that Jesus has surprised us yet once again.

In fact, Jesus has a lot to say in his public ministry about “listening,” or, if you wish, “hearing,” since those two words reflect the same Greek verb. And what Jesus has to say about “listening/hearing” might in fact be a surprise both to Mary and to Martha. Listen to the words of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel:

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Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?
I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my

words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house. (6:46–49).

Then his mother and his brothers came to [Jesus], but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” But [Jesus] said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. (8:19–21)

While [Jesus] was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” But [Jesus] said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” (11:27–28)

For Jesus, “listening/hearing” is never complete without an “active/doing” response. So, Mary’s motionless and silent stance in front of Jesus evidently won’t last all that long. Instead, Mary will be compelled by her very “contemplation”—that is, her contemplative “listening/hearing” stance in front of Jesus—out into the world. Mary’s motionless “listening/hearing will compel her out into the active world of construction, to build houses with strong rock foundations. Her “listening/hearing” will compel her out into the active world to “do the word of God” in physical response to what she has heard. Her “listening/hearing” will compel her out into the active world to “obey the word of God” in a life of faithful living. That will be the surprise for Mary. Her “contemplative” instincts will in fact drive her out into

a big, wide world of active response to the word and the words of Jesus.

And the surprise for Martha? Well, Martha is the activist who hears Jesus' words of commendation for Mary, the contemplative. But she would hardly be mistaken, if she were to hear in Jesus' words, or perhaps in the silences around them, an unstated, nonverbalized, but very real call to her, Martha, the activist, to become a contemplative herself, a "rabbinical student" who "sits at Jesus' feet" and "listens to what [Jesus] is saying." As Jesus puts it, "There is need of only one thing." And Martha "needs" that just as much as Mary does. Especially if she is to continue her "activist" life of hospitality to those whom she "welcomes into her home."

So, there we have it. Jesus once again surprises. Mary, the contemplative, discovers that she is in fact called out into the world of active and faithful response to the words of Jesus and the word of God. And Martha, our faithful activist, hears in the words of Jesus a call to join her sister Mary "at Jesus' feet" and to gain sturdy foundations for all those "houses" that she is building in her life of activism. And here, in turn, is Luke's curious, upside-down story about discipleship.

Let those who have ears hear the words of Jesus and the story of Luke and discern them rightly. Amen.



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