

Luke 10:34-42

Being and Doing: The Story of Mary and Martha

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Scripture

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (NRSV)

Sermon

This story, like the others in our Lent series, is quite well-known and people who know the story often have strong opinions about it. Either they love the story, or they hate it. This is because, the way most of us have been taught this story makes it seem like the author of Luke has created a story about Jesus taking a side in a disagreement between two sisters. I say "created a story" because many progressive scholars believe this story did not originate with Jesus but was original to the author of Luke. This doesn't mean it doesn't hold some truth for us, though, it does.

It is a story written to teach us something about the way in which the author of Luke understood Jesus and what it is to be his disciple. If you are someone who identifies with Mary, this story may be music to your ears. If you identify with Martha, this story is likely not your favorite. I believe there has to be more to this story than Team Mary and Team Martha, more to it than the bickering between two sisters or "Mary gets it, and Martha doesn't." In fact, theologian and writer, Dr. G.B. Caird, wrote in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, "Few stories in the gospels have been as consistently mishandled as this one."¹ And I tend to agree.

¹ G.B. Caird, *The Gospel of Luke* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 149.

Caird and I aren't the only ones who think this. For years, scholars and preachers have known this traditional interpretation needed some work and have tried out some different ways of understanding it, some ways that don't pit one person's faithfulness against another. After all, in other places in the gospels, Jesus affirms acts of hospitality and describes discipleship as both hearing and doing the word. This story's criticism of Martha seems very un-Jesus like to me, especially given that we all know Christians who are do-ers, like Martha, and be-ers like Mary, all of whom are faithful.

Well-known Disciples of Christ scholar and preacher Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock wrote about this story, "If we censure Martha too harshly, she may abandon serving altogether, and if we commend Mary too profusely, she may sit there forever."² So, how shall we understand it?

One interpretation some scholars have tried out is that Jesus' affirmation of Mary "sitting at his feet," must be his way of encouraging and empowering women as disciples. Certainly, as a woman, I can get behind that. Unfortunately, that interpretation still doesn't address why Jesus was so hard on Martha, "Mary has chosen the *better* part..." This interpretation still elevates Mary's activity over Martha's. And one thing that makes this interpretation ring hollow for me is that this story comes along in Luke's narrative right after the story of the Samaritan we read last week. There is no question about the value of doing in that story. The Samaritan, the one who "did something," is held up as an example. In fact, at the end of the story, we were told to "Go and do likewise." So, how can we reflect on and connect with this story?

This week, I read a paper, written by Mary Stromer Hanson, that was submitted to the Society of Biblical Literature in November 2018. Hansen is the author of the book, *The New Perspective on Mary and Martha*. Her paper and the book present a radically different interpretation of the story of Mary and Martha, based on the author's intensive study of the original Greek. I've enjoyed thinking about her translation of the text and her interpretation choices, which have drawn both accolades and criticism from other scholars, which I have read as well. I share some of her ideas with you today as a way of, not only giving us the opportunity to think about this story in a new way, but to remind us, once again, that biblical translators make important interpretation choices in their translations and interpretation matters. And since I have never liked how the traditional

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 152.

interpretation of this story makes the “Marthas” of the world feel, let’s explore something new.

Here is Hanson’s translation of this story from the original Greek:

As they were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha received him.

She had a sister named Mary who also was one who sat at the Lord’s feet, always listening to his words.

But Martha was constantly torn apart concerning much ministry. She suddenly approached him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister regularly leaves me to minister alone?” Tell her therefore that she may give me a hand.

But the Lord answered her saying, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and agitated concerning much,

But only one thing is needed: for Mary has chosen good and it will not be taken away from her.

Beginning with verses 38-39, there are a couple of things to note in Hanson’s translation:

Martha received Jesus alone, she could have been at her home, but maybe not, and, according to verse 39, both Mary and Martha were his disciples. Most translations skip the conjunction that is present in the original Greek, translated here, “also.” There are several options for that translation of the conjunction and one of them is “also,” which would indicate both Mary and Martha were “sitters at the Lord’s feet.”

“Sitting at the Lord’s feet” isn’t a description of someone’s physical proximity to Jesus, though you wouldn’t know that looking at the art based on this story. A person “sitting at the Lord’s feet” was a disciple. I tried to think of a phrase we use in the same way today and the best I could come up with was someone saying, “Bob is my right-hand man.” Obviously, Bob doesn’t only stand on the person’s right side. We understand that phrase to mean that Bob’s contributions to the work being done are important. These two sisters were disciples of Jesus. In this case it seems that Martha was fulfilling that role in one way, while Mary was fulfilling it in another. Note, in the text, neither woman is curled up at Jesus’ feet, eating bon-bons, and neither is bustling around the house cooking. This

story, according to Hanson, is about different ways of being a disciple, different ways of following Jesus.

There are a couple of things that stand out in Hanson's translation of verse 40 compared with other translations as well. First, the Greek word, *perispao*, often translated "distracted," actually means "greatly troubled," which scholars say indicates Martha was perpetually stressed out over *diakonian*. "What is *diakonian*?" you may be asking. Elsewhere in the New Testament *diakonia* is translated, "ministry," the work of ministers — apostles, disciples, pastors, prophets. But here, for some reason this word is generally translated "tasks." According to Hanson's translation of this text, "...Martha, a disciple of Jesus, is overwhelmed, not by everyday household tasks, but by ministry." Hmmm...I wonder why biblical translators would want this story to be about women bickering over household duties rather than being concerned about the work of ministry? I will let you ponder that.

In the meantime, we can let understand feeling overwhelmed with ministry, can't we? Following the ways of Jesus, caring for and loving our neighbors, sharing God's love with the world, it can be overwhelming. Sometimes it feels like the tasks before us are too daunting. We can't possibly even make a dent in them, especially by ourselves. If we are honest, we might admit, if Jesus was here, we might say, "Hey, can you round up some of these other disciples and make them help us?" Church leadership feels that way sometimes, whether you are a lay person or clergy. There is always more to do. Honestly, just trying to live out our faith can feel overwhelming at times.

Jesus responded to her, "Martha, Martha..." His repetition of her name signaled familiarity, a close relationship, with her. So, we might expect words of comfort to follow. That is not what the New Revised Standard Version translators gave us. It says:

"...you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Hanson, on the other hand, is a little less heavy handed in Jesus' response to Martha:

"...you are anxious and agitated concerning much,
But only one thing is needed: for Mary has chosen good and it will not be taken away from her.

There is a clear difference between these translations. In the NRSV, the author of Luke portrays Martha as someone who is unable to focus on what is really important and a little flighty, while Hanson's translation portrays her as someone who has the weight of the world on her shoulders, in fact, all she can think about is ministry. And then, the NRSV has Jesus telling Martha that Mary has chosen what is "better," while Hanson describes Mary's choice as "good." According to Hanson, in the explanation of her translation choices, it is unnecessary to compare the sisters' activities, pitting them against each other. Martha was doing her thing, which was good, and Mary was doing her thing which was also good.

So, what kind of blew my mind this week as I reflected on this different interpretation is that, while we've talked about Mary a lot when we teach this story, Mary doesn't talk at all, she doesn't have a single line. In fact, according to Hanson, Mary wasn't even present. That changes everything, doesn't it? It certainly makes the majority of the artwork inspired by this story seem out of step.

Honestly, I am still thinking about this translation. As always, I will cite my sources in the manuscript we post on the website, so you can read Hanson's paper for yourself if you are intrigued. And if you are interested in thinking more about this story and how the ways in which the original language is translated affect interpretation, I will direct you to reflect on the King James Version of this story. For many, especially in more conservative traditions, the King James Version is THE translation. And in this case, the King James Version is remarkably similar to Hanson's translation, which many scholars would label a feminist translation. Ironic, huh?

<https://stromerhanson.blogspot.com/2015/11/mary-of-bethany-her-leadership-uncovered.html>

<https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/reinterpreting-mary-and-martha-part-1>

Mary Stromer Hanson, *The New Perspective on Mary and Martha* (Wipf and Stock, 2013).

If you are wondering why I took you on this nerdy theological journey, only to say, I don't know for certain what the "correct interpretation" is, you are probably not

alone. Here's the thing, I think scripture ought to cause us to think for ourselves. And, while I know ambiguity, especially with regard to the Bible, makes people uncomfortable, I believe it makes room for more people and for the messiness of life.

Some of us live out our faith primarily with hands-on acts of service and justice. Some of us live out our faith primarily by reading, studying, praying, and meditating. Some of us live out our faith primarily by writing and using our voices. Some of us are consumed by questions and doubts. Most of us live out our faith with a combination of all of these.

And really it's kind of seasonal, isn't it? In some seasons of life, we have the energy and inspiration to go and do. But sometimes, when our bodies slow down or when we are at home nursing babies or caring for elderly parents, we live out our faith by simply being present with people who need us, metaphorically "sitting at the feet" of Jesus. Following the ways of Jesus looks different for all of us and even looks different today than it might tomorrow. Right now, we are in a season of trauma, living with a pandemic, isolated, competing with one another for vaccines and silently wondering if we are doing enough to protect ourselves, our families, and our neighbors. And we have found that being disciples right now looks different than in other seasons.

The fact that we are not worshiping in person is just one example of that. I mean...most of us have been taught that following Jesus looks like going to a physical place called church every Sunday. But here we are...trying to be the church when discipleship looks like an empty church. Many of us have experienced the frustration in this season of wanting desperately to help others and finding it cumbersome and even dangerous to do so. We are finding new ways to serve, to do and to be, until we can safely be together and do things together.

All I am saying, dear ones, is **do** what you are able to do and **be** who you were created to be. I think Luke wanted his audience to recognize that faithfulness is expressed...with our hands and feet and in our hearts and minds. There is not one way that is better. There are moments when one way is needed over the other, but all ways are good. You are good. And you are loved. Amen.