

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 07/17/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, July 17th

Luke 10:38-42

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The changing church

Following directly after the Parable of the Good Samaritan, this week's Gospel lection continues the theme of being a neighbor with Luke's familiar short story of Jesus' interaction with Martha and her sister Mary. This passage is commonly used as a caution against "doing" the neighborly things at the expense of "being" the neighbor. In other words, being distracted by *doing* the work of service and not *being* fully present to be attentive to the guest - in this case Jesus and His teachings. The application to our lives is that we may often be too distracted *doing* the work of Christ and fail to spend sufficient time *being* with Christ through reading His Word, through prayer and through reflection. When the story is looked at within the cultural context of the day, there may be additional insights available that relate to discipleship and the church.

Luke 10:38-42

Given this passage is embedded early within the Travel Narrative (9:51-19:27), we know Jesus is traveling with a group of His disciples. According to Luke, this would have included men and women. Luke informs us that a group of women were supporting Jesus and His disciples out of their own means (8:1-3).

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

The village here is most likely Bethany (John 12:1). Martha appears to be the mistress of the house. She is mentioned first among her siblings (John 11:5) and is thus likely to be the oldest. In our passage Martha is the one who welcomed Jesus and His entourage into her house. The name Martha is the feminine form of the Aramaic word for "lord" or "master" and thus "Martha" may have been a title rather than a name.

In v.39 Luke describes Mary as sitting at Jesus' feet. This is not just a description of Mary's location. Luke here is formally identifying Mary as a disciple of Jesus. *At the feet of a Rabbi* was a common expression meaning to be a disciple of that Rabbi (e.g., Paul in Acts 22:3). Had Mary just become a disciple or was she already traveling with Jesus as His disciple? Regardless, she was sat among many men and no doubt be traveling with many men following Jesus. Kenneth E. Bailey, a New Testament professor who spent more than 40 years in the Middle East,

suggests this was the source of Martha's distraction.¹ Martha may have been worried about what would happen to her younger sister as a result of being a disciple of Jesus. Mary is hanging out with all these men! This is disgraceful! What will family and neighbors say? Who will marry her after this? A possible rendering of the text can be, "*Martha was distracted from properly serving many*" (Interlinear). The worry about her sister was the distraction. Martha complains to Jesus, even accusing Him of not caring. Her complaint is expressed as being left to serve alone. Martha may be referring to that moment or be referring to Mary leaving Martha and following Jesus. In the latter case, Martha wants her sister back!

Jesus appears to understand Martha's deeper concerns. First, using Martha's name twice is an example of a *conduplicatio* - a rhetorical device used as an amplification or an appeal to pity. In this case, Jesus is acknowledging and having pity on Martha's concerns. Second, Jesus acknowledges that Martha is anxious and troubled about many things which seems to acknowledge her worries about her sister and what happens after she leaves. Jesus then firmly states that *one thing is necessary*. In other words, it is necessary for Mary to be His disciple. She has chosen wisely (the good portion - an analogy with the theme of food and serving which Martha initiated her complaint over). Nobody will take this opportunity away from her.

Reflections

The familiar application of this text often includes a moralistic caution of being too involved in work and the need to give our full attention to the Lord while we are in prayer or studying His Word. It is also used to illustrate how we all have different spiritual gifts and that we are all called to different vocations. There is also the idea that Martha represents more of a works-based salvation mindset where her sister represents more of a faith-based salvation mindset. Yet there may then be more to this familiar text than the way it is typically discussed.

As our church congregations are becoming older and smaller, there is a real concern that many local churches are running out of workers to keep the buildings and ministries going. More and more stress is being placed on the remaining Marthas as a higher percentage of church resources and available volunteer hours must be deployed inside the church. Such is necessary to keep buildings (that have now become much too big for the smaller congregations) maintained and open for the few hours a week they are used. The Marthas are working desperately to keep the established local church model going. You can hear their anguished prayers. In places where there used to be hundreds of members there are now handfuls. What used to be the pillars of the local community nurturing to spiritual and physical needs are now relics consuming depleted resources.

There are also the Marys. Like the character in Luke's text, the Marys have accepted the call to be in radical discipleship with Christ. Their life is being spent in community with other disciples in prayer, worship, study, and being the hands and feet of Christ in their local communities. This form of discipleship, while not new (see Acts 2), is challenging the religious norms in our day. In many cases it is only possible to "be" the spiritual church when unencumbered by the "doing" demanded by the legacy bricks and mortar church building.

While at first glance there may be some expected antagonism between the Marthas and Marys due to their different perspectives, in the text they are sisters. They are of one family. We do not face a choice between church or discipleship. In the text, Jesus does not tell Martha to stop what she is doing, He simply tells her that Mary has made the right choice for her. What we do face is the challenge to determine what it means to be the *Ekklesia* in our unique time and place. No matter what organization model emerges, we recognize Christ is the Head of the visible Church and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit with gifts to continue Christ's work on earth.

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¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 193,194.