

## Interpretations of Luke 10:38-42

Clara Beth Speel Van de Water MC'71

As a young woman, I remember hearing a sermon based on the story of Mary and Martha in the gospel of Luke. The pastor's sympathy clearly lay with Martha, not Mary, perhaps because he identified his wife as a Martha! As a student, however, I identified with Mary. Ever since, this brief story in Luke 10:38-42 has intrigued me. It has also intrigued and sometimes puzzled many readers over the past nineteen centuries, leading to a variety of interesting interpretations. It is, as one interpreter says, "perhaps the strongest and clearest affirmation on the part of Jesus that the spiritual and intellectual life was just as proper for women as to men" (Swidler 1979:192).

The Revised Standard Version presents the story as follows:

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

And here it is in the New Revised Standard Version:

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 and listened to what he was saying. 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." 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."

I will first take a look at the story itself, then discuss some historical and contemporary interpretations, and finally give some examples that apply some of the story's messages.

In addition to Luke's story about Mary and Martha, two interesting stories in the gospel of John feature the sisters, as well as their brother Lazarus. The story of the raising of Lazarus and Martha's confession of faith in Jesus is told in John 11. John 12 tells about Mary's anointing of Jesus at a dinner in his honor, probably to celebrate Lazarus's return to life.

John 11:1 identifies Bethany as the village of Mary and Martha. So Bethany is the "certain village" that Jesus entered in the Lukan account. Bethany is about two miles from Jerusalem near the Mount of Olives. Jesus apparently spent considerable time in Bethany, accepting the hospitality of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. John 11:5 says that Jesus loved the sisters and their brother. "Mary and Martha may have been the most important and prominent women in Jesus' life after his own mother" (Witherington 1990:99).

The first of these beloved sisters mentioned in the Lukan account is "a woman named Martha" (10:38). It is interesting that the name Martha means lady or mistress, for Martha was the mistress or lady of the house. She "welcomed him into her home" (10:38, NRSV), presumably with great warmth.

Mary, too, must have been glad to see Jesus, because she sat reverently and raptly at his feet. "Sat at the Lord's feet" (10:39) is a particularly significant phrase, because Jewish disciples or students sat at the feet of their chosen rabbis or teachers. The apostle Paul, for example, says that he was "brought up. . . at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3). In our Mary-Martha story, "Luke is intimating that Mary is a disciple, and as such her behavior is to be emulated" (Witherington 1990:100). Disciples attached themselves and gave their allegiance to particular teachers and the movements they led, as did Jesus' followers, including Mary.

Mary "listened to his teaching" (10:39, RSV). A female student listening to her chosen teacher and being held up as a model disciple does not seem strange to twentieth century readers. But how commonly in the first century were women treated as disciples who were encouraged to learn about their religious faith? "The teaching of women by Jesus is particularly significant when we consider the customs of Judaism in his time. Women. . . were not permitted to study the Scriptures with a rabbi. . . . The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) clearly shows Jesus' willingness to consider women as worthy students. In this text, Mary takes the traditional male role of 'sitting at the feet' or studying with the rabbi. Jesus approves of her interest in intellectual and spiritual matters, for she is told that she has chosen the better part" (McHaffie 1986:15).

The ongoing controversy among Biblical scholars today as to how much Torah or religious law women were generally taught may reflect controversy in Jesus' day (Witherington 1990:100). First century Rabbi Eliazer said, "If a man gives his daughter knowledge of the law, it as though he taught her lechery," and "Better to burn the Torah than to teach it to women" (Emswiler 1977:22). Rabbi Azzai expressed a different opinion, "A man ought to give his daughter a knowledge of the law." And one of the Mishnah's rabbinic laws states, "He may teach scriptures to his sons and daughters" (Witherington 1990:7).

Jewish women learned in public by attending synagogues and listening to the reading of the scriptures, although scholars argue over whether they were confined to separate areas of the synagogue in Jesus' day. "There are no known examples of women reading in the synagogue during Jesus' time" (Witherington 1990:7). Also, women were not counted in the "minyan," or quorum, needed for a synagogue service. Evidence has been discovered in funerary epitaphs and dedicatory inscriptions, however, that women were given titles in synagogues in areas of the diaspora under Greco-Roman influence.

In one view, "Women's leadership in synagogue services was nothing extraordinary. It is well attested by inscriptions. . . . Women held the offices of 'ruler of the synagogue,' elder, priest, and 'mother of the synagogue'" (Torjesen 1993:19). On the other hand, some scholars see such titles as honorific; perhaps the women were patronesses who supported the synagogue financially (Meeks 1983:32-39). Also, it is not known whether this evidence reflects any possible leadership roles of Jewish women in the village life of Palestine, which was different from Jewish life in urban areas of the Roman Empire.

I dare say that it was controversial, at the very least, when women attached themselves to teachers as disciples, and that many rabbis would not have accepted Mary as Jesus did, even teaching her in her home.

Jesus was not only a teacher, but he was also Mary and Martha's Lord. Mary "sat at the Lord's feet" (10:39), and Martha addressed Jesus as Lord (10:40). Mary and Martha probably called him "Mari" ('my Lord' in Aramaic). Luke used the Greek word *Kurios*. In Jesus' time, Lord was coming into use as a title of respect to address those with authority, such as rabbis. "Thus Jesus during his earthly life could be addressed as 'Lord' in recognition of his authority as a teacher (rabbi) and as a charismatic prophet" (Fuller 1985:573). In John 11 Mary and Martha address Jesus as Lord when they ask his help regarding their brother Lazarus. Even though the visit to Mary and Martha recorded in Luke presumably took place before the raising of Lazarus and anointing of Jesus, the sisters had already come to regard Jesus as Lord, at least in the sense of rabbinic teacher.

Even though Martha accepted Jesus' authority as her teacher, she was "distracted" (10:40) from listening to him. What was she distracted by? The RSV says "by much serving" and the NRSV "by too many tasks." These words are translations of the Greek word *diakonia*, which is usually translated as service or ministry. The word deacon is related to it. Sometimes, but not always, *Diakonia* refers to table or domestic duties. In this context I believe that we can be sure that it does.

It is interesting that Martha appeals to Jesus to tell her sister to help her with the work. Why did she do that? Perhaps Martha saw that Mary was too engrossed in listening to Jesus to notice the domestic tasks and her sister's desire for help. Certainly Martha appealed to Jesus because she knew that Mary accepted Jesus' authority. In a recent seminar, N.T. Wright, dean of England's Litchfield Cathedral, speculated that Martha may actually have protested more because she perceived Mary's behavior as scandalous in taking a male role

than because she needed help with the work. That is an interesting possibility. Also, domestic tasks were very time consuming for village peasant women.

It is intriguing that Martha complained to Jesus and even ordered him about, as recorded in Luke 10:40. She complained, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?" (RSV) Then she commanded, "Tell her then to help me." She must have felt secure in his loving friendship and surprised by his response. Yet she must have needed his reminder. I think that he chided her gently, softly, saying "Martha, Martha" (10:41). He recognized her stress and distress, for he said, "You are anxious and troubled about" (RSV) or "worried and distracted by" (NRSV) "many things." Commentators have often interpreted "many things" rather literally as many dishes of food. She may have been preparing an overly elaborate multicourse meal or doing additional tasks. Perhaps Martha's distraction by such activities was a typical pattern recognized by Jesus.

Now that I am a housewife and mother as well as a church educator, I identify with Martha as well as with Mary. It is very easy for me to get distracted from what is most important by mundane but necessary housekeeping chores. Although researching and writing this paper is enriching my spiritual life, I have been distracted from focusing on it many times! Becoming distracted from activities that enhance our educational and religious growth by other activities, even if they are useful, can become a way of life that is ultimately unfulfilling. We may need reminders from time to time, just as Jesus reminded Martha.

Instead of "many things," Jesus responds to Martha in 10:42 that "one thing is needful" (RSV) or "there is need of only one thing" (NRSV). "Mary has chosen the better part" (NRSV) or "good portion" (RSV), and it won't "be taken away from her." Jesus' response reminded Martha of what was most important and may have called her up short, because it means more than first meets the eye.

"This passage is somewhat subtle," writes Joseph Fitzmyer (1985:892), "since Jesus' answer to Martha's fitting request at first seems to reassure her, telling her that she need prepare only *one* dish. But when his pronouncement is complete, one realizes that the 'one thing' means more than one dish, and has taken on another nuance. It has become the 'best part' and he who has been part of it guarantees that it will not be taken away from Mary to help distracted Martha."

The "better part" is the word of God. Therefore, "The 'one thing needful' for women as well as men is a response to the Word, the 'best portion' of which they shall not be prevented from partaking" (Witherington 1988:130). Jesus insists that the privilege and responsibility of listening to the word of the Lord must not be taken away from Mary. She has the right and the duty of a disciple to learn from her religious teacher. The term "disciple" means learner in Greek. It is fitting that this word came to be used for the followers of Jesus, the ultimate teacher for Christians.

Jesus' apparent rebuke of Martha for not listening to him is in reality a reaching out to her. He is reminding her to follow him by following her sister's example. His affirmation of Mary's choice sends a message to Martha to make the same choice. The best part, God's word, is for her as well as for her sister. Jesus, the rabbi, calls Martha to be the best disciple that she can be, learning all that she can from him. Thus the story of Mary and Martha is frequently understood as a call to discipleship, entailing study of God's word, for women as well as men--and rightly so, in my opinion.

Historically, the story of Mary and Martha has been given several interesting interpretations. In one influential interpretation, Mary was seen as illustrative of the contemplative life, and Martha of the active, less spiritual life. Therefore women, as well as men, are called to the full discipleship of the contemplative life. This view of the scripture is often attributed to Origen, a theological writer in the early church.

Pauline thought was also used to support this type of thinking. For example, in I Corinthians 7:34, Paul writes, "And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband." Paul makes similar comments about men in verse 33. Women in the ancient church were

encouraged to be part of orders of virgins or widows, and Mary of Bethany was considered a model to be emulated.

Such an understanding helped lead to the view that it is more spiritual to be a nun than a housewife, once widespread in the church, but needless to say no longer popular! Today most Christians do not think that full discipleship requires a contemplative life, but rather a life that puts spiritual matters first.

Several other interpretations that had acceptance in past times are not generally heard today. St. Augustine, ancient Bishop of Hippo, saw Martha as a symbol of this world and Mary as a symbol of the world to come. An interpretation used in anti-Jewish polemic said that Martha represented salvation by the law and Mary salvation by faith, which replaced it. A similar interpretation was widely held during the Reformation by Protestants, who saw Mary as symbolizing justification by faith and Martha the Catholic view of salvation by works.

There are also some interesting modern interpretations of the story. One that I have heard from the pulpit gives the contemplative-active understanding a new twist. Mary is still seen as contemplative and studious and Martha as active and practical. Women are seen as Mary and Martha types. But the new twist is this-- God blesses both types of women and both kinds of lives equally. I have no doubt that God blesses both, but this interpretation misses the point. For Mary chooses "the better part," God's word, and Martha, however busy with activities, needs to put God's word first in her life, as do all Christian women and men.

Yet applying the passage to our lives by identifying ourselves or others as Mary or Martha types can lead to useful insights. Moreover, we must be flexible and realize that at different times the same person may identify with different sisters, or even with both sisters at the same time.

Another popular modern interpretation holds that our story tells women that they need to balance their homemaking duties with their religious responsibilities as Christians, such as devoting time to prayer and Bible study. A contemporary variation says that women should balance both careers and home responsibilities with their spiritual lives. In the text, however, Jesus is not telling Martha to balance her responsibilities but to put her spiritual life first. Only with faith as the foundation of our life will we be able to put our activities into perspective.

A recent feminist interpretation uses the story to support careers over homemaking, but this view, too, misses the point. Jesus' words "are neither an attempt to devalue Martha's attempts at hospitality, nor an attempt to attack a woman's traditional role; rather Jesus defends Mary's right to learn from him and says this is the crucial thing for those who wish to serve him" (Witherington 1990:101).

Jesus affirmed that women, like Mary and Martha, are capable of more than domestic service. "He was asserting women's worth in a society that considered women property and on a par with camels when it comes to brains; Jesus affirmed their godliness and their right to study and learn. Jesus was making a radical statement for his time, not setting up women for conflicts between home and career" (Cartledge-Hayes 1990:72).

Luke affirmed this new role for women and probably placed the Mary-Martha story after the story of the Good Samaritan for that reason. "Both the Samaritan and Mary step out of conventional roles. . . . The Samaritan for Luke illustrates the second commandment ('Love your neighbor as yourself.'). Mary exemplifies the fulfillment of the first commandment. ('You are to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your energy, and with all your mind.')" (Funk 1993:325). But Mary should not be used as a model to set the love of God over the love of neighbor, as she has been at times, any more than the Good Samaritan illustrates the opposite.

An important contemporary interpretation of the story of Mary and Martha originates with one of today's foremost feminist theologians and New Testament scholars, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Most interpreters treat the story as a description of an event in the life of Jesus, as I have been doing. Schussler Fiorenza

(1986:29), however, contends that it "is generated by and addressed to a situation in the life of the early church."

Schussler Fiorenza believes that the Mary-Martha narrative reflects the debate over leadership roles for women in the early house churches. The 'good portion' chosen by Mary is the listening to but not the diakonia--the preaching of the word. "Luke 10:38-42 pits the apostolic women of the Jesus movement against each other and appeals to a revelatory word of the resurrected Lord in order to restrict women's ministry and silence women leaders of house churches, who like Martha might have protested, and at the same time to extol the silent and subordinate behavior of Mary" (Schussler Fiorenza 1986:31-32).

Schussler Fiorenza views Martha's service as representing a ministry in the early church and interprets Mary's behavior as subordinate. However, Schotroff (1995:271-272), another feminist scholar, writes

Schussler Fiorenza. . . rejects that Martha's 'serving' was housework (in the sense of Luke 10:38-42) but considers that it has to be understood as community administration and that the juxtaposition with Mary was an attempt to play a submissive Mary off against a self-possessed Martha with the intent of suppressing women's self assertion. But Luke's high valuation of 'listening,' e.g., in 8:21, speaks against such a reading, as does the socially prevalent usage of diakonia, which set apart from the listening on the part of the women and men disciples (in the form of Mary) is all that is left for Martha to do: serve as a housewife does.

Most contemporary scholars, as in the previous quotation, do not devalue Mary's listening to Jesus' teaching. Nor do they view it as an attempt to silence women in the early church. N.T. Wright, for example, in a recent seminar, said that he sees Mary as being a disciple first in order to be a rabbi in turn. As a student, Mary also has the potential to be a teacher, so she can lead others to be disciples of Jesus, too, just as male disciples could. Wright calls the Mary-Martha story a symbolic moment on the way to Galatians 3:28, where Paul writes, "There is no longer . . . male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Certainly Luke, and John as well, for that matter, were aware of resistance to the leadership roles assumed by women in some of the early house churches. Therefore, they may have related stories of Jesus' conversations and interactions with Mary and Martha in part to support women's discipleship, as they believed Jesus did.

Because I interpret our story as a call to discipleship, I believe Mary acted on that call when she demonstrated devoted discipleship in anointing Jesus, even at the protest of Judas, the disciple who held the common purse. (John 12:3-6) Martha showed her response to Jesus' call when she publicly proclaimed that he was the Messiah, even before he raised her brother Lazarus. (John 11:27-44)

It was precisely such expressions of faithful discipleship on the part of women that led some of them to assume leadership roles in the early church. They became disciples, just as men did, by listening and responding to God's Word through Jesus with faith. "It is the universal priority of faith and equality in faith that gives women a new and equal place under the new covenant. This is the radical nature of the Gospel and why it dramatically affected women's status especially in first century Palestine" (Witherington 1990:102).

Thus Mary's faithful listening to Jesus' teaching does not imply a subordinate role for women, any more than similar behavior of the part of men would imply their subordination. To the contrary, "Jesus made it abundantly clear that the supposedly exclusively male role of the intellectual, of the 'theologian,' was for women as well as for men, of how he explicitly rejected the housekeeping role as *the* female role. How this story must have buoyed up those Jewish women whose horizons and desires stretched beyond the kitchen threshold. . . . Luke's sensitivity to women ultimately preserved this Magna Carta for women" (Swidler 1979:272-3).

As a call to discipleship, this story has opened the doors to rich spiritual lives for women, including study of the intellectual content of the Christian faith. Often women have been enabled to share their faith and knowledge through educating others in turn. This passage is therefore particularly meaningful to me as a

church educator, as well as a woman. I see in it a clarion call to Christian education. Our scripture can be applied to men also, just as we apply Biblical passages about men to women! For both men and women need to make listening to the Word of God the first priority in order to fully experience the Spirit of God in our lives.

What happens when we don't? Let me give an example of how the scripture applies to an experience at my church. The Christian education committee used to be responsible for putting on an elaborate Easter breakfast. This committee of "Marys" and their male counterparts found the breakfast a burden, distracting us from hearing the word in the Easter story as we worried about the breakfast. So we turned the breakfast over to the "Marthas" on the congregational life committee, but they, too, found that it spoiled their experience of Easter. As wonderful as it is to have a committee of active and practical doers like this, it is a mistake to let them, like Martha, do too much kitchen duty. They need to be able to feed their own faith before they feed other members' mouths! Therefore, we decided to have a simple continental breakfast. Freed from unnecessary distractions of preparing many things for the breakfast, both Mary and Martha types, men as well as women, were able to give priority to the "one thing . . . needful," hearing and heeding the Word of God in the Easter story.

A recent article in *Horizons*, a magazine for Presbyterian women, provides an insight as to how this first priority should apply to women's lives today. Although not written as a commentary on Mary and Martha, the article shares this message with our scripture. Under the heading "Making Time for the Spirit," the author says, "This has to be your first priority. Listen to what is being said to you. Even those who are in tune with God's guidance struggle to maintain a balanced life. . . . God may not provide us with perfectly ordered lives, but God does open doors that lead us closer to being productive, positive, and realistic Christian women" (Kercheval 1995:15).

Being productive, positive, and realistic Christians represents good discipleship for women and also for men. Jesus opened the door to discipleship for women, as well as men, as evidenced in the story of Mary and Martha. Jesus "treated Mary first of all as a person (whose highest faculty is the intellect, the spirit) who was allowed to set her own priorities, and who in this instance had 'chosen the better part.' And Jesus applauded her: 'It is not to be taken from her'" (Swidler, 1979:192).

My father, Dr. Charles Speel, followed Jesus' example in this story. While at Monmouth College, he treated young women students, as well as men, as people with high intellectual and spiritual faculties to be nurtured. So did Dr. Stafford Weeks and the Rev. Paul McClanahan, other members of the religious studies department when I was a student at Monmouth. These teachers opened the door of knowledge and led the way to faith for their students. Our education at Monmouth College became part of our intellectual and spiritual lives and cannot be taken away from us.

Likewise, when any of us chooses to listen to God's Word as our first priority, "it will not be taken away." (10:42) That is Jesus' pledge and promise to us. God holds the door open, and Jesus calls us to enter in faith.

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