

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

17.07.2022
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Introduction

As we have noted before, hospitality is one of the core themes of Luke's Gospel. Unsurprisingly then it features in various ways during the travel narrative, both as part of instructions and parables (e.g. 10:5-9; 12:36-38; 14:7-14; 15:11-32 etc.) and as stories such as the one we encounter in today's Gospel text. We might assume that a domestic interlude like this would provide a respite from the tensions surrounding Jesus' journey to Jerusalem – but far from it! Not only is there the hint of internal conflict within the story itself, but the passage also has a background of competing textual traditions and an interpretive history which has tended increasingly towards readings predicated on various binary oppositions – readings which have then themselves become a driver of resentments or divisions, particularly with respect to the role of women.

Preparation:

- Have you ever been labelled/or labelled someone else as a 'Martha' or a 'Mary'?
- What did you understand or mean by the phrase?
- How did you – or they – respond?
- Do you think such labels, or what they encode are helpful in any way? If so – how? If not – why not?

Text

Luke 10:38-42

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.”

Comment

This familiar text not infrequently generates rather negative emotions ranging from exasperation to frustration, or between mild annoyance and downright resentment. At the heart of this are the words of Jesus to Martha that: “... *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*”; and the way in which this is typically presented as indicating a binary opposition – with Martha (and whatever she is seen as representing) distinctly and decisively on the wrong or, at the very least, the inferior side of it!

Interestingly though there are two versions of this line in the textual tradition: the commonly seen version above and a longer version (which appears in the NIV and the 1977 version of the NASB) which renders the opening part of Jesus’ comment as the more complicated and enigmatic “...*you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one.*” Examination of a range of evidence, including early exegeses by some of the Patristic writers, strongly supports the argument that the longer version is the original (for a detailed examination of this see Wasserman below). This would also be consistent with a key principle of textual criticism (*Lectio difficilior potior*) that where different manuscripts have conflicting versions of a text then the more difficult or unusual one is likely to be the original, since scribes are more likely to swap unusual words or difficult sayings for more familiar words and softer sayings than vice versa.

Textual variations also need to be considered in connection with the reception history of a passage. What seems to be clear with this text is that earlier Patristic exegesis produced a range of readings in which the ‘many’ and ‘one’ elements were not necessarily viewed or coupled in an oppositional way – for example drawing parallels with Jesus’ conversation with the rich ruler in 18:19–23 or countering heresies suggesting that all manual activity was wrong. However in the 4th and 5th Centuries both the Western (Latin) and the Eastern (Greek) traditions moved towards readings which increasingly dichotomised the sisters, reducing them from people wrestling with real dilemmas to ciphers representing various oppositional binaries (contemplation/action; Spirit/Law; spiritual/material etc.) in which one of the elements was seen to be, if not completely antithetical to, then at least a serious hindrance to mature Christian living. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the shorter version of the text became the preferred one since it lends itself more easily to such readings. The end result is an interpretational legacy in which conflict, and moreover conflict of a specific and polarising kind, is often seen as the main key to understanding the significance of this short scene. However this can lead us to overlook other important aspects of the story, and of how it fits into the larger picture of Luke’s Gospel.

The passage begins by making clear Martha’s status and role – she is the owner of the home in which the action occurs and thus she is responsible for the care of the guests. Her preoccupation with the provision of suitable hospitality – almost certainly the preparation of a meal – is totally understandable from a cultural point of view. Moreover, hospitality is an important theme throughout Luke so it seems unlikely that the Lucan Jesus would be criticising her simply for being busy attending to this rather than quietly listening to him talking or teaching. It would appear then that there is something more going on here and the three key verbs applied to Martha in v. 38–40 throw some light on this. Each is different (despite the way they are translated in the NRSV and elsewhere) and together they build a

very vivid picture of her state.

In v.40 she is described by Luke as 'distracted' but the sense of the Greek word (*perispa* – lit. to draw around*) is more akin to the rather old-fashioned word 'cumbered' and indicates a state of being over-occupied by or weighed down. Then in v.41 Jesus describes her as both 'worried' (*merimna* – to be anxious about) and 'distracted' (though here the word is *thorybaz* – troubled). The first of these words has etymological roots in other verbs which relate to being drawn in different directions and divided into different parts; the second is closely related to the Greek and Latin words (*tyrb* and *turba*) from which we get the word 'turbid'. So we have a picture of someone whose attention is being so pulled in multiple directions that they can no longer focus properly on any of them and consequently everything becomes muddled – no wonder she feels cumbered!

This presents an interesting contrast with the picture drawn by the single verb associated with Mary in this section – *eklegomai*. The word means picking out or selecting from among a number of options, and the use of the middle voice** reinforces the feeling of Mary carefully weighing up competing options and then making a considered choice to go with just one of them. The wisdom of this course of action is then confirmed by the words of Jesus describing it as *ho agathos meris* – 'the good part'. *Agathos* describes something which, because it is good in its character, is beneficial in its effects. And *meris* – a single part – contrasts with the many parts into which Martha's attention has been divided.

Perhaps then the problem is not so much that Martha is *busy* but that she is *distracted* and thus unable to be properly present to the moment and its necessary tasks. There are some echoes here of the instructions of Jesus to the 72 right at the start of the journey narrative that when there is an important job to be done, it is important that focus and energy is directed towards it. In this story, Martha and Mary both have task which requires that focus and energy: in the one instance to offer hospitality through receiving and caring for a guest, and in the other to offer hospitality through attentive listening. Both tasks are important and both demand a quality of presence and proper attention. The difference seems to be that on this particular occasion Mary is able to give that but Martha, for whatever reason, is not.

Notes

* all information on etymology and grammar from: W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978)

** the middle voice denotes that the subject is both an agent of an action and somehow concerned with the action.

Both the subject matter of this passage and its interpretational history can provide starting points to help us reflect on conflict. You are invited to consider some of the following questions, or any others which the passage has raised for you – perhaps with reference to a conflict in which you are, or have been, involved.

How do you understand the concept of hospitality in the context of conflict? Does this story provide any additional insights into that?

What does it mean to be properly present in a particular situation or with a particular person, especially in the context of a conflict scenario? Are there any dangers in this? Are there any skills which it would be useful to try and develop?

How important is it to be aware of the different ways in which conflict situations and their histories are narrated or understood? In what ways might a better understanding, especially perhaps of hidden histories or conflicting narratives, help us in finding ways to move forward?

How can we avoid getting distracted or losing clarity or energy when dealing with important tasks or difficult situations?

Prayer

Jesus,
may we be
generous in our hospitality,
and attentive in our presence,
focused in our actions
and constant in our energy,
kind in our judgments
and gentle in our reproving,
just as you were.
Amen.

Further Reading

Tommy Wasserman, “*Bringing Sisters Back Together: Another Look at Luke 10:41–42.*” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 2 (Summer 2018), pp. 439–461.

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