

An Unforgettable Visit

Text: Luke 10: 38-42

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It must have been an unforgettable visit. And just to be a bit playful about it, we might cast it as Jesus making a pastoral visit to a few of his friends, two sisters by the names of Martha and Mary.

It's a spare story in the Gospel with only five verses, sixteen punctuation marks, and three people. Yet, as often can be, some of the most significant of life's lessons arrive in small packages. So let's not allow the brevity of the passage to diminish our attention.

And it surely must have begun with a knock at the door, or some other means of arousing attention in the household. Martha, whose home it was, responded. On the inside, we might hear Mary asking from the other room, "Who's at the door, Sis?"

More imaginary fun: we might conjure that after a breath-taking blend of delight, surprise and dumb-founded disbelief, Martha responded. "Jesus", she said - in the best sense of the word of course, "we weren't expecting you."

Let me stop us for a moment. We all know the story, right? We've heard it told or maybe even read it countless times before, no? This is not really anything new to us, hey? So tell me then, what happened next?

The Message tells best: "Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home."¹ Martha! Her first response was genuine, extravagant hospitality! We sometimes miss that in the story, but what a wonderful thing. I so like that side of Martha.

I like it because the predominant interpretation of that time, cast on this narrative, is that Martha quickly kicked into high gear and stirred up a storm in the kitchen; making ready for a feast of amazing magnitude.

But then, in a rather passive-aggressive way, she half-blamed Jesus for not caring that Mary wasn't helping. I suspect that it was a well-worn script she and Mary had played before. She even directed Jesus: "Don't you care? Tell her to come and help me!"

Let me stop again. Did you know that the custom of the day when unexpected guests dropped by was one of generous simplicity and that only one thing needed to be served? That was the practice that went all the way back to Abraham and Sarah.²

A famous painting by Alessandro Allori portrays Martha serving Jesus as he and Mary visit. Behind them is a table set with breads and fruit and cakes all in excessive proportion.³ You see the disconnect: one visitor and food enough for a dozen or more!

Others noting this excessive response have interpreted that Martha was locked in the social expectation placed on women that is still with us today. And that Jesus chiding her “only one thing is needed” was referring directly to the overflowing table.

But he also said, “Martha, you are distracted and worried about many things.” Here the story catches the shadow of her innate distractibility. And those norms of expectation and her inclination to overdue conspired and led her to grimace and grumble.

Please: I know the lines of defense here! Martha is, after all, the one who got the work done. She is the one who performed well. She is the one who over-functioned. She is the one who saw the task. She is the one who tried so hard to make the moment right.

Every Martha in the room knows what I’m saying! But Jesus knew, too. And he also knew that a single dish and a bit of beverage were all that the day required, not much serving; not much more, not much less.

Let me stop us once again. Because Mary has some hidden facets in her story, too. In fact, there is a subtext, a truth on the underside. She was attentive and gentle, yes, but there was a whole lot more beneath the surface.

She, too, was in the face of the social norms of their time, but she played it out very differently. Women were not ever allowed to sit at the feet of any rabbi. But Mary was comfortable enough in her own skin to sit right down.

More: Women were not permitted to learn by discussion rather only by instruction; and that was only to happen in the synagogue. But there she was with Jesus in a house, listening, absorbing, discussing back and forth.

Most precious. Mary knew her own need and sought no one’s permission to seize the holy moment before her. She was focused enough, gifted sufficiently with her own confidence, to be present when the guest in her midst happened to be Jesus himself.

Jimmy Carter tells this story. “One evening at the White House, Amy wanted to tell me something that had happened that day at school. Rosalynn chided that I was very busy with a lot on my mind, so she should not take my time. So Amy began hurriedly. Daddy, I’ll tell you real fast. Realizing her frustration, I answered you don’t have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly. And she said to me, then listen slowly.”

Well, Mary knew how to listen slowly. She knew that her moments of being with Jesus would soon be gone. She must have known, too, something that Paul Tillich said 2,000 years later: “the first duty of love is to listen.” And so she gave him her full focus.

We stop one more time with this passage that says so little and so much. Some people have insisted that this is a very simple and helpful story with a binary moral to it, a right way and a wrong way. That could be, but simple binary lessons were not usually Jesus’ way.

Others have called it a narrative of human temperament; that Martha and Mary live in all of us and offer us a glimpse into the deep and unconscious patterns of behavior and life; and that the story speaks by providing a contrast of characters. That could be.

Others have seen it as a juxtaposition of contemplation portrayed by Mary, with a life of action as we have in Martha; a contrast of inner life and outer response with a kind of soft judgment about the sequence and value of being over doing, word before deed. That could be.

Still others have placed it as a lesson of priority in life. That, in fact, both being and doing are necessary attributes of following Jesus; that Mary and Martha provide a profile of choice, but that the sequence should always begin with full attention to what Jesus has to say and then an appropriate response, and not the other way around.

So what do you think? Could it be any of these or might it be all of them? Or is there yet another interpretation that you have come to favor and follow? Lent does call us to wonder.

How do we - you and I - interpret these five verses and sixteen punctuation marks? These weeks ahead bid our best thinking.

And we are invited into that wondering and thinking, as the first priority at this time we call Lent. As ever, in the name and Spirit of the One who is, indeed, at the center of what this season is all about. May it be so. Amen.

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¹ Eugene Peterson. The Message. Navpress, 2002, p. 1427.

² Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett, eds. Feasting on the Word. Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, pp. 263-267.

³ Christian Century, July 24, 2013. On Art: "Christ with Mary and Martha", p. 39.