

Proper 11C: Luke 10:38-42
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A Tale of Two Dinners

A little over a decade ago the Smithsonian's Museum of American History exhibited a cut-and-paste book composed by one of the Founding Fathers. This book, a "Bible" of a sort, was put together by none other than Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson, you'll recall, was a deist, which meant he didn't believe in miracles, which is a position difficult to square with the witness of Scripture. So one day Jefferson took a penknife to the Bible and literally cut out everything miraculous, everything that didn't conform to his notion of reason and morality, and then pasted remaining bits back together. The result was this book, of a mere 86 pages, which sought to give the story of Jesus without all the inconvenient parts that Jefferson didn't like.

Now, "the Jefferson Bible," as it has been called, is a pretty extreme case, but the fact is that we Christians often do something not very different—cut out the parts of the Bible we like and ignore everything else. You see, when it comes to reading Scripture, few things are easier than taking some verses we like, isolating them from their biblical context, and then pronouncing those now rarified, out-of-context verses as some universal truth. Think of the verses, "Judge not, lest you be judged." "God is love." And "Love is patient, love is kind, love keeps no record of wrongs," so often read at weddings. When we take such verses out of their context, at best what you get are the sentimentalized kitsch of cross-stitch wall hangings or Precious Moments figurines. At worst, these passages become grounds for justifying pet ideologies and personal agendas. As my professors warned us at seminary: "a text without a context is a pretext."

The brief story we just heard from Luke's Gospel is a case in point. How many times has this little vignette been used to prove the superiority of the contemplative life over the activist life, with the "one thing needful" that Jesus refers to lifted out of this story to show the importance of listening to God over doing God's work?

It's amazing how much people have made out of this brief passage, given how spare the story itself is. The passage is just six verses long, with little to no details. But, because there's so little to go on, many commentators and interpreters over the years have rushed in to turn Martha and Mary into mere tropes, ciphers, metaphors that stand for any number of things about which they have an ax to grind. Is this a story on the value of contemplation over a deeds-based ministry, as is often said? Or is it instead, as some suggest, a response to the growing prominence of women in ministry in Luke's day, and so we should take this story as meaning that women should instead only have a passive role in church? Or perhaps the story is proof for those who are suspicious of certain kinds of political activism in the church. Better to study Scripture, to hear sermons, than to be involved in the political activity, in the service of one cause or another. Which interpretation is right?

In truth, it is difficult to say. Again, we don't have much to go on. But there are also other difficulties which confound easy interpretation. For one, the Gospel of Luke is known for the

importance it gives to service, to ministry, yet Martha's service is apparently criticized by Jesus in this story. Also to the issue of women in leadership, Mary, sitting at Jesus' feet is the one who is most like the male disciples, not Martha. What's more, a few weeks ago we heard Luke's account of Jesus telling the 72 missionaries that when they are welcomed into someone's house, they are to eat whatever is set before them. Yet here Martha's busy meal preparations are met with a seeming lack of appreciation. Finally, too, Jesus has just told the Parable of the Good Samaritan which ended with the instructions "Go and *do* likewise." So how can Jesus go from advocating an active ministry of mercy to poohpoohing a person who is busy serving? It doesn't make sense. This story, at least as it is usually interpreted, does not fit very comfortably in Luke's Gospel.

All of this is a roundabout way to say that making sense of this passage is fraught with difficulties. The temptation to turn this into a moralistic little lesson about this or that or into a mere metaphor for something larger is very real. Indeed, it would be easier to do that than find a solidly satisfying way to understand the brief story.

This leads me to think that the question we should be asking is not whether this passage teaches us about whether it is generally better to listen than to serve, to be contemplative or to be active, but rather: in the larger Kingdom of God scheme of things, what do we learn from this passage? What particular aspect of life before the face of God is being addressed here?

I want to suggest this morning that the answer to that question is *hospitality*. The story begins, you'll remember, with Jesus coming to Mary and Martha's house, leading the two women to take on the role of hosts, offering hospitality Jesus and perhaps his other disciples. The question this situation raises for us is then, How do we receive Jesus? How do we show him hospitality? Before we venture an answer to that, we might consider first what we think Jesus' first priority is when he comes into a person's home. I think it's safe to say that, despite what Jesus later says to Martha, service *is* important, indeed expected. Jesus deserved to be served and have a meal dished up for him—even a very nice meal was not something Jesus would have sniffed at. And presumably on this evening, Jesus gratefully ate what Martha set down on the table before him.

In fact, Jesus wouldn't likely have said anything critical to Martha at all, had she not taken the initiative to ask Jesus to rebuke her sister for not helping out. It was only then that Martha came in for some -gentle- reproach. We are to take it then that service is good, lovely, in fact, and is in its own way a "needful thing." Jesus says nothing here to undercut the idea that hospitality and service are noble endeavors and the right thing for disciples to do. But when we elevate that form of hospitality over attending to your guest, giving attention to the Word of God—when we get to thinking that Jesus is more interested in *haute cuisine* than in the Bread of Heaven that alone gives life—that is when we get into trouble.

For, when we do that, we miss out on the "good portion" that Mary enjoyed. "One thing is needed," Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." Luke has it that Mary has a "good portion," but scholars agree it would be fairer to the original Greek to say she had the *better* portion. So it's not that the portion that Mary took was good and Martha's portion was bad, but it was that Mary's was better.

What's more, there may be something of a joke, a double-entendre, intended here. You see, "portion" in the Old Testament often referred to a literal portion of food at a meal. If that holds here, then Jesus' answer to Martha's complaint may be a play on words—Martha is concerned with preparing food to serve Jesus, but Jesus is saying Mary has seen the true banquet laid before her by him that evening and chosen a "portion" of *that meal*. No matter how good the food was that Martha was making for Jesus, the better meal was the one Jesus was serving to Mary as she sat at the Master's feet. Makes me think that this brief incident could well be described as "a tale of two suppers." The first, the one being fussed over by Martha, and the second, the one lapped up by Mary. And Jesus is saying Martha had best stop fussing about and sit down before that "food" gets cold!

So, Jesus may or may not be elevating contemplation over service—but it's clear, we need both in the church and generally we shouldn't have to choose between one or the other. There is a time to go and do. There is a time to listen and reflect. If we asked Jesus which example we are to follow, the active Good Samaritan or the contemplative Mary, Jesus would probably say "Yes."

The problem comes when we choose one approach to the exclusion of the other. It can't all be work, say, even doing God's work. If you don't have some vision of what God is doing, our work, our ministry, our acts of service will inevitably wear us down. Without a vision of the Kingdom, without the promise, the encouragement Jesus gives us, we cannot go on like Martha, tending to the needs of the world or even the needs just of our congregation. It will finally worry us, distract us, anger us, exhaust us, and beat us down. *With* that vision, though, with time spent immersed in Jesus' words, we are able to do all manner of great deeds, loving and living in the name of Christ.

I'll give you an example of how this works out: Grace Thomas was born in the early twentieth century as the second of five children. Her father was a streetcar conductor in Birmingham, Alabama, and so Grace grew up in modest circumstances. Later in life after getting married and moving to Georgia, Grace took a clerking job in the state capitol in Atlanta, where she developed a fondness for politics and the law. So, although already a full-time mother and a full-time clerk, Grace enrolled in night school to study law.

In 1954 Grace shocked her family by announcing that she wanted to run for public office. What's more, Grace didn't want to run for drain commissioner or for the city council: Grace ran for governor of the state of Georgia. Now, here was a total of nine candidates that year—nine candidates, and one issue. It was 1954 and the issue was *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark decision that mandated the desegregating of schools. Grace Thomas was alone among the nine candidates to say she thought this was a just decision. Her campaign slogan was "Say Grace at the Polls"! Hardly anyone did, though, and Grace came in dead last.

Her family was glad to have Grace get it out of her system, except she didn't and so decided to run for governor again in 1962. By then the racial tensions in the South were far more tense than they had been eight years earlier. Grace's progressive platform on race issues earned her a number of death threats. One day she held a rally in a small Georgia town and chose as her venue the old slave market in the town square. As she stood there, Grace motioned to the platform

where once human beings had been bought and sold like cattle and she said, “The old has passed away, the new has come. A new day has come when all Georgians, white and black, can join hands and work together.” At that point a red-faced man in the crowd interrupted Grace’s speech to blurt out, “Are you a communist!?” “Why, no,” Grace replied quietly. “Well then, where’d you get all them galldurned ideas!?” Grace pointed to the steeple of a nearby Baptist church. “I learned them over there, in Sunday school.”

Grace had spent time listening to the Word of her Lord. What she heard changed her life and launched her on a very specific mission in life. It’s essential to take time to listen to the Word of the Lord. But, don’t be fooled, that Word is dangerous—it always leads to action!

Indeed, it’s not that we should forgo active service, doing the will of God, ministering to the needs of the world, to engage in worship and Bible study. For the time spent at Jesus’ feet, feeding on the meal of the Gospel Kingdom, will lead us to do great works, greater works than we would on our own, because we have been fed and fueled and inspired by our time spent with Jesus.

Let us then not pick and choose from the good things God gives us, passing over the portions we don’t like, the greens and veggies, for the best bits, but instead fill our plate with a good portion of everything from the banquet Jesus provides. For the road is long and the work hard, and God wants to strengthen us for the days ahead. Thanks be to God!