

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – July 21, 2019

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Luke 10:38-42

(From *Homiletics*; “Sis-ling Rivalry”, July 21, 2013)

Luke 10:38-42 recounts a brief visit of Jesus to the home of Martha and Mary. This account is intriguing as it does not appear in any of the other Synoptic Gospels to which Luke otherwise tends to be quite similar. In fact, a figure named Martha is unknown in either Mark or Matthew. However, the appearance of Martha and Mary here has led some commentators to wonder whether there might be a discernible relationship between the Gospels of Luke and John as John's gospel makes mention of a Martha and a Mary who are both sisters of the resuscitated Lazarus (John 11:1-44). While a person named Lazarus does not appear in the Synoptic Gospels, it is notable that Luke nonetheless has a parable about a wealthy man and his poor neighbor, a man named Lazarus. That Luke and John should share a Martha and a Lazarus where Mark and Matthew seem unaware of such characters could suggest some form of relationship between these gospels.

If the sisters in Luke are the same as those mentioned in John 11, it may be that this Lukan scene took place in Bethany. However, since any relationship between Luke and John would be difficult to determine with certainty, the equation of Luke's "certain village" (10:38) with Bethany is a problematic one. Indeed, in Luke as a whole, geography tends to take on a more theological, rather than literal, significance. While it could be, as some commentators suggest, that Luke does not know the name of the "certain village," it may be somewhat more helpful to imagine that Luke simply does not want to distract his audience from the more important geographical locale: Jerusalem, to which Jesus has set his face to go (9:51) on a journey that will culminate in his death. Regardless of the precise location, however, it is notable that the house into which Jesus enters is identified as Martha's. While this identification could indicate that Martha is a widow, as it may be more natural to identify a house with the home's *paterfamilias*, one can only speculate about whether or not this is the case. Furthermore, the identification of the home as belonging to Martha could indicate that she is the elder sister and that, as such, the primary task of caring for the home has fallen to her rather than Mary, who is introduced in the very next verse (10:39).

Though Mary is introduced first as the sister of Martha, the more important identifier for her is based on her actions: sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his word. This identification becomes all the more noteworthy as it is juxtaposed with the description of Martha's actions which are described in verse 40: being "distracted by her many tasks." The Greek verb used here for "distracted" (περισπαομαι) is a rare word that does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament, though it does occur in the Greek translation of a few Old Testament texts (2 Samuel 6:6; Ecclesiastes 1:13, 3:10, 5:19). While the NRSV's translation choice of "distracted" is suitable, its translation of the phrase that follows (περι πολλην διακονιαν) rather obscures the Greek which may be more literally translated as "concerning much service/ministry." Though Luke does not use this word for service/ministry elsewhere in the Gospel, he does employ it in Acts where it consistently has a positive connotation (1:17, 1:25, 6:1, 6:4, 11:29, 12:25, 20:24, 21:19). Thus, it appears that Martha's service, in whatever form this is imagined, is not simply busy work, but consists of the legitimate tasks of providing hospitality to an honored guest. Based on her question to Jesus which follows, it appears that she has a similar opinion. The phrasing of the question in the Greek is such that the question expects a positive answer. To achieve the same effect in English, one might loosely translate the question as "You do care, don't you, that my sister left me alone to serve?" It would seem that Martha's expectation is that Jesus will agree with her concerning the importance of hospitality.

The answer that Jesus gives to Martha's question, however, is surprising. This reply in verse 41 is especially interesting when read in conjunction with later parts of the gospel. The Greek word used for "worry" here (μεριμνω) appears in Luke only here and in chapter 12 (12:11, 22, 25-26). In each case, Jesus is either giving instructions not to worry or pointing out the futility of such a practice. If these instructions in chapter 12 can be retrojected into chapter 10, the contrast between Mary and Martha becomes all the more clear. While Mary is listening to his word, Martha is missing it. Nonetheless, it may be that Jesus' rebuke here is not meant to be a harsh one. The repetition of Martha's name may be intended to soften the blow of the words that follow and suggest that despite the words of correction which Jesus offers, he still has compassion for Martha.

The concluding statement in verse 42 makes for a puzzling end to this pericope, if for no other reason than the rather significant textual variant at the beginning of the verse. While many manuscripts support the reading as it is found in the main text of the NRSV ("there is need of only one thing"), there are also several manuscripts that preserve a different reading, as noted in the NRSV footnote to this verse: "few things are necessary, or only one." If the first reading is preferred, the implication is that the "one thing" that Jesus is referring to is his word (τον λογον αυτου) to which Mary is listening. If the second reading is preferred, the "few things ... or one" may be referring to the preparations that Martha has been making to serve Jesus. By this understanding, Jesus would not be stating that his word is the necessary thing, but that only a few dishes or courses for the meal, not an elaborate buffet, are all that are necessary. Given the conclusion of this verse ("Mary has chosen the better part"), it seems advisable to prefer the first reading ("there is need of only one thing") as Mary has not been described as a consumer of food but as a consumer of the word. Unlike food which may be served or denied, Mary has free access to the word, and Jesus makes clear that she will continue to be free to enjoy it.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for this text (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Luke 10:38-42

- 1.** With whom do you resonate in this brief story? Mary – just wanting to soak in as much of Jesus’ presence and teaching as you can? Martha – serving and providing and taking care of everyone’s needs, even to the point of distraction? Or perhaps Jesus – caught in the middle between two perspectives and asked to weigh in (maybe with or without a strong opinion of your own)? How does this resonance speak to your own life and faith?
- 2.** Do you think Martha’s complaint in this passage is just? Given the importance of hospitality in their culture (especially to an honored guest), was it not reasonable for Martha to expect her sister to “share the load” of providing it? If Martha should have been attending to Jesus’ presence and words, would not Mary’s help with their household tasks allowed them both to be fully present to Jesus?
- 3.** I suspect that, on average, we service-minded Brethren identify more readily with Martha than most. And so Jesus’ rebuke, even if compassionate and gentle, deserves our attention. What are the things with which we might be “worried and distracted?” Do you hear a personal or communal call or challenge from Jesus in his response to Martha? If Mary’s example is the one in this story to be emulated, what does that look like for you/us?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?