



Jesus Mafa, Martha and Mary, Cameroon 1973

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July 17, 2022

Luke 10:38-42

Jesus and the Art of Hospitality

Prayer: You have invited us to your heavenly banquet, the banquet of life. Help us this morning to find our places, imagine your hospitality, your justice, your mercy, and extend our love so that we may make room for one another...

This image is from Jesus Mafa which is a 1973 collective effort to create images that reflect the life of Jesus in a particular culture – among the Mafa people in Cameroon. The identity of the artist, as I understand it, was never revealed because images from the life of Jesus were recreated as a community effort with actors and set designers; the person who captured the image was one artist among many.

- Martha's mouth and gaze reflect her complaining about her sister to Jesus; Mary's face reflects that she is listening – to Jesus, not to her sister **who appears to be talking over Jesus**. He's still mid-sentence, gesturing in conversation!
- On the left side of this painting you see people working, Martha and someone in the background, and on the right side you see Jesus sitting and talking with

Mary, and the artist has included a background image of a woman having a conversation with a child. The artist has given us the two sides: Martha's side and Mary's side. Where do you find yourself in this painting? We can't see Jesus' face, but we can see the expressions on the women's faces. How have your features been composed this week?

I knew more about this story, when I knew less. This one used to be easy for me. I know of no other passage of scripture which is as widely distrusted among mature Christian women as this one. My Aunts used to say that they took the whole Bible as Holy Scripture, but not this story about Martha. And the injustice done her. They wanted to vote this one out.

There's nothing quite like having exhausted yourself getting the house in order, preparing meals and looking after all that has to be looked after, caring for the physical needs of your household -- because you love them, more than life itself, want only good things for them, and to make their lives easier -- and then ... to be criticized for your efforts. By none other than Jesus Christ himself. Do you feel the slow burn...?

Long before we gained the language of feminism, women worried about the way Jesus treats of Martha here. We know that Jesus was a frequent visitor in the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, these were his friends; he is criticizing the source of the hospitality he has the advantage of. It's an outrage. Jesus says some hard things. And then... he eats the dinner!!

When I was young and living in my parent's home, this was much easier. I thought of my mother as Martha. My mother was the sort of mother who intimidated my friends' mothers with her domestic accomplishments. My mother did everything herself from scratch, and was in constant motion. She did it, she would say, because she enjoyed it, (she relished it) and it contributed to our prosperity and well-being.

My parents grew all of our vegetables in a garden, my mother canned every fruit and vegetable we ate for the winter -- with the exception of bananas and oranges. She made many of our clothes, and she made them well. Any and all manner of domestic arts, my mother tried and mastered -- knitting, crocheting, quilting, entering these items in the county fair and bringing home ribbons, etc. She went through phases where she learned to cook various regional cuisines around the world: French, Indian, Chinese she studied and mastered them in turn, usually in conversation with a friend from that region. All summer long I was reminded to put down the books I read for pleasure, and to set aside my other interests, so I could stand in a steamy hot kitchen with her and do miserable tasks like sterilizing canning jars, and help with the whirlwind of activity that was my mother and her domestic projects -- which there was no end of; it seemed to me that she kept making up more. I went along, although not always willingly. In my mind, she was Martha with a myriad of projects and activities keeping her off kilter. (You have to can fresh produce before it spoils -- you're always in a race against spoilage.) I was Mary, if she would only just leave me alone and let me go back to my books, and my interior life.

That interpretation seems too simple now.

I know less about it now. Between our four children (the youngest of whom just graduated from HS) and the two adults, there are and have been for years many tasks and competing needs at my house. There's packing and unpacking for camp, schools, trips, laundry and meals, all of the household falderal – organization, reorganization, breakage and repair. I seek not to appear to be busy, I seek not to rush people, I seek to be "present in the moment" -- but I know that the people in my household, and the people who know me well, experience me as busy, frequently. Because I am. In my mind, my busyness is rooted in deep love and clear values, but sometimes I'm on a roll with a focused task in mind, and I cannot control what others perceive, that others will perceive my activity as I understand it, or if they just see the busyness. "Distracted and worried." Jesus' rebuke of Martha sounds sharper to me now; I know exactly why my Aunts cringed. I cringe too.

Martha was uniquely blessed to receive Jesus Christ himself in her home, but the burden of the home, of the hospitality itself, worried and distracted her. Let me flag for you here that this home appears, according to the writer of the gospel of Luke, to belong to Martha. A home is a blessing. Our blessings become our burdens, in our attempts to keep up with our own desires. A spouse, a child, a garden, a chosen field of work -- all of those blessings carry within them the possibility of overwhelming burden on any given day. Martha's guest wasn't just passing through town; Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. On his way to Calvary, passing through life to death. A few more weeks and it would all be over. Martha worried about the household; Jesus was taking on the redemption of the world. Jesus is worthy of attention in the moment.

Maybe you've been distracted and worried too. "Distracted and worried" is an equal opportunity condition, not limited to housework or to women. It's very easy in a work environment to become distracted and worried. There are plenty of Marthas in the workplace, and they make it worse for each other. You can become distracted and worried about money, or a child's poor choices, or health problems, or the neighbors who are driving you crazy. Martha was worried and distracted by many things. The distractions are by definition, endless.

The contrast for Jesus, is that Mary was fully absorbed, prayerfully, in her love for Jesus, listening to him. The writer of this gospel goes in the very next verse to show Jesus praying, and teaching his disciples to pray, with the Lord's prayer, and then he teaches them about prayer,

So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

(Luke 11:9-10)

Our challenge is to move from being distracted and worried, to the center, where our deepest values and loves are. Seeking what is worthwhile, entering the door which leads to the garden of delight.

From where I stand today, I suspect that Martha was making it harder than it needed to be, doubting her own ability to do her tasks in turn, and to listen too, doubting Mary and Jesus' love for her while she did them. Doubting that the moment was as fleeting as it was; doubting that others might pitch in and work with her later on – it's her house, she can ask them. The whole house doesn't need to be clean to have one guest over, the whole meal doesn't need to be perfect, to provide sustenance and a focal point for gathering, the whole world does not need to right itself for us to gather in Jesus name, knowing that in God's love Jesus is reconciling all things, even now.

Let Martha's moment of exasperation remind you this morning that the blessings in your life are to be cherished, and not made into a burden. That Jesus forgives each one, and invites us to a fuller life.

Choose the better part for yourselves this week. Whether you have many tasks to do, or can find a moment to listen to someone else in the limited time we have, with Mary now, choose the better part.

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