

Luke 10:38-42

We have to ask, What problem is Luke trying to solve in this story about Mary and Martha? For centuries, it's been read as a reproof of Martha. She's fussing around with mundane things like snacks and drinks, while Jesus, the Messiah, is teaching the gospel truth. For pete's sake, Martha, get your head out of the kitchen and drink in this sublime moment!

But that's so cheap. I'm sorry, but anybody who's a responsible grownup has to appreciate the seriousness of what Martha's trying to do. Food and drink don't just materialize by themselves. Somebody's got to think ahead, borrow extra cups from the neighbors, make sure nobody drank the last of the good wine, and so on. We just saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan how important it was to take care of logistics and details. The Samaritan had wine and oil with him, because he was an adult who thought ahead and prepared for his trip. He made sure he had some denarii on him, and thus was able to put down a deposit at the inn for the wounded man's care. Jesus' main point in that parable was that the hero of the story was, unexpectedly, a Samaritan—but the *reason* he was a hero was that he took the trouble to care—and was prepared to care—for the physical needs of his neighbor.

Hospitality is a huge value, always, and conspicuously in the cultures of the Bible. When Abraham, on the plain of Mamre, is visited by three strangers, Genesis tells us:

he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

Abraham runs, hastens, and runs again. He's taking his responsibilities pretty seriously, I'd say. But in fairness, he has some backup. He has Sarah and the servants. So. What's wrong with Martha's response to her situation? Doesn't she deserve some backup too?

Mark Davis, a Presbyterian minister whose learned hobby is to analyze the Greek in the lectionary texts, tells us that the words for "worried" and "distracted" are actually pretty strong words.ⁱ "Distracted" is used for the way people felt in Acts 20 after someone fell out of an upper-story window. "Worried" is the word Jesus uses in Luke 12 for how disciples are going to feel when they're brought before the authorities, who have the power to bind, imprison, and execute them. So Martha is feeling the way you do when someone falls twenty feet, or when you're about to go up against the majesty of the law. "Panicked" and "terrified" might be better translations. Mark Davis thinks that Martha is having a panic attack. She's overwhelmed by the expectations she feels as a host, and she feels completely alone in it.

Part of what I think Jesus is saying to her is that having Mary help her wouldn't really help her. He's definitely saying that Mary fully deserves to sit and listen, and not sacrifice her opportunity to learn, but he's also implying that Martha could feel better without Mary's help. It's not the hospitality that's the problem, it's what it means to her that's the problem.

Carolyn Hax, who writes an advice column, recently wrote about "how to cultivate calm during a stressful move."ⁱⁱ The first thing she says is that moving *is* awful, so being not-calm is reasonable. But then she gives suggestions that are analogies for actual physical movement, which I think is interesting. "You're trying to move yourself somewhere emotionally," she says. "Go for the low-hanging fruit." By that she means "do the most obvious stuff," e.g., forgive yourself for being stressed. Take five minutes, because unless the moving van is literally pulling

into the driveway, you have five minutes. Make lists, so your brain doesn't have to hold everything in place. Find a "reliable source of perspective," by which she means, think about how tiny our planet is or how in a hundred years none of this will matter, or that twenty dollars more or less won't make you richer or poorer. A reader adds:

This reminds me of something I do: When I'm upset, I remind myself of a similar situation I've been in before, then recall how long it took me to feel better. So I'll think of this bad moment I'm in now as being about the same size/scale/pain level as X, then I'll recall I felt better with X after about three days, or a month, or whatever. Then I think, "Yeah, I can do three days/a month/a whatever," because I've done it before. There's something incredibly reassuring about that.

This advice column happened because being worried and anxious about many things is a common human problem, not one confined to people who are morally deficient. And because we all recognize that when we feel that way, unless someone actually *has* fallen out a second-story window, there is probably something distorted in our picture of what's going on.

I recently heard an interview with a journalist who studies megachurches, David Farrier.ⁱⁱⁱ He said that most megachurches reach a membership of about 10K, and then they stay at it—not because their members stay, but because as new members join, older ones are leaving. And why are they leaving? Many reasons, some as sinister and damaging as homophobia and authoritarianism, but also just because of burnout. Because to maintain the high production values of worship services and coffee service and educational offerings, and to make the church super-attractive to visitors, members have to do a ton of volunteer work. Young people especially are vulnerable to being asked to become unpaid "interns," and to give every waking minute to the church, that service being equated with service to God.

That's a distortion. When the institution becomes focused on maintaining itself instead

of caring for God's world, it starts turning its members into Martha. It is implied that you're not being faithful if you're not turning yourself inside out to make the music just right, the lattes just right, the small group discussion just right. Actually the mission of the church is to serve God's creation, if you're exhausting or pulling apart the members, you're not doing the mission.

Jesus affirms the appropriateness of Mary focusing on his teaching. That's important, because it affirms the full discipleship of women. I think he's also implying that Martha deserves to allow herself full discipleship too, and that if she compromises the quality of her hospitality to do so, that's okay. As with parenting, good enough is good enough. I remember the first time I visited Aliya and her family, when they were in temporary housing, Huma brought me a cup of tea. I'm sure they would have liked to offer the more wonderful tea and raisins and nuts that they later had on hand when they were more settled, but they couldn't, and of course I was touched and appreciative simply that they wanted to serve anything at all.

Hospitality is more the attitude than the execution. To paraphrase Rumi,

[God] wants you to be happy.
Don't keep serving [up] your pain!

If you could untie your wings
and free your soul of jealousy,

you and everyone around you
would fly up like doves.

There is a medieval legend that after Jesus' resurrection, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus sailed to southern Gaul, where the local villagers were terrorized by a monster, La Tarasque. It had the face of a lion and razor-sharp teeth. Its body was similar to a dragon, and it had six legs ending in claws so sharp that one swipe could slice a boat in half. On its back was an armored

shell, like that of a turtle, with spikes running along it, and to finish off, it had a tail that it used like a whip.

This monster killed every living creature that crossed its path: man or beast, on land or in the river. It could shoot fire from his eyes and its mouth, even its breath would burn whatever it touched. Legions of soldiers were sent out to fight it, but because of its impenetrable shell, their spears and weapons were useless.

Martha was preaching about miracles, and the villagers told her that if she could vanquish La Tarasque, they'd believe her and convert to Christianity. She took up the challenge, and went and found the monster. It was eating some poor guy who'd gotten too close, but Martha threw some holy water on it, which extinguished its breath, and then she held up a cross and the monster was subdued. It lumbered up to her like a lamb and she put her girdle on it like a leash. I am sorry to say that the villagers received the Tarasque with violence, pelting it with stones. It was not hurt because its shell was so hard, but when it realized how much pain it had caused, it died of shame.^{iv}

One hopes that the villagers focused on their own spiritual development after they'd converted, so that they became less vengeful, but the story doesn't say. But I love what it says about Martha. Once a tormented soul, so possessed by anxiety and panic that she could not participate fully in Jesus' visit to her home, she came to be someone who faced down a lethal monster. She overcame the monster of anxiety, and then was strong enough to overcome La Tarasque. That's a lovely promise to all of us who can step back and recognize when we are refusing ourselves permission to be fully present to the sacred moment.

Let us pray:

Slow us down Lord,
and for now simply remind us that
only one thing is needful,
that we be still before you
and know that you are God. Amen.

ⁱ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/07/marthas-anxiety-struggling-alone.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/advice/2022/07/12/carolyn-hax-cultivate-calm-stressful-move/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://peteenns.com/episode-208-david-farrier-whats-going-on-with-megachurches/>

^{iv} <https://curiousrambler.com/saint-martha-and-the-tarasque/>