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Luke 10:38-42

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TWO SISTERS, TWO WAYS, ONE THING

SERIES: GOSPEL OF LUKE

Generous Hospitality in Romania

Last week I returned from Romania where I attended a national symposium celebrating the life work of the poet Traian Dorz. Dorz's *Immortal Songs* coupled with the fragrance of his holy life unleashed a spiritual force that baptized his disciples with unconquerable love. In this raging sea of suspicion and fierce hate, they created islands of refuge, embracing others with outrageous generosity that knew no limits. Nothing prepared me for the welcoming embrace of Big John and Lucie Pop. Their love was almost too difficult to receive. In those days families were rationed five eggs a month and a few meager ounces of meat. But as guests in their home, I found that there were two eggs on my plate when I arrived at breakfast. Though it was illegal to take foreigners into their homes, it was unthinkable to our hosts to have it any other way.

The second year a neighbor discovered that my friends were hosting me and promptly informed the Securitate. When the Securitate came to arrest me, no one was home, and I was forced to quickly flee the city with no passport or belongings. It's a terrible feeling to think that your presence has put someone's life in jeopardy. But Big John was fearless and sought me out. When he found me in the middle of a busy intersection, he unabashedly hugged me and shouted, "*Te iubesc!*" ("I love you!"). With no care for his safety, he made certain I got my belongings back, not to mention a beautiful bedspread Lucie handmade for us.

This summer I felt privileged to once again enjoy the hospitality of Big John and Lucie. Anyone who comes to their home is treated like royalty. One of our team members asked Lucie what it is like during the days of Communism. It was then I learned that the Securitate interrogated Lucie for 8 hours after I left their home. She refused to be intimidated and said she felt a powerful presence of the Holy Spirit strengthen her. When asked if she had foreigners in her home, she said, "No foreigners come into my home, only family, brothers and sisters (implying Christians)." When they said they had a warrant to search her home, she replied, "No, you don't." They finally got one, and she said, "You're not welcome in my home. For you are not my family or friends." One of the vile interrogators came to their home, but he couldn't carry out the search until he had a witness. A neighbor (Christian) volunteered. During the search they discovered a door leading to the basement. Descending the stairs they saw hundreds of Bibles and stacks of Christian literature. The Securitate agent turned white and asked the neighbor, "What do you see?" She said, "I don't see anything." When they came upstairs the other agent asked what they found in the basement. The vile policeman said, "Just garbage." Hearing of Lucie's courage and the price she was willing to pay to be hospitable brought me to tears.

Entertaining Angels

We have just concluded our summer series in Romans chapter 12 entitled "Overcoming with Good." In that text Paul expounds how

as followers of Jesus we are to manifest "genuine love" both within the church and in the larger community of a hostile world. One of the ways we demonstrate such love is to "pursue hospitality."

In the early church hospitality not only played an important role in furthering the gospel by housing itinerate missionaries, but it also created an effective stage for evangelism. Intimate and welcoming hospitality is more effective in breaking down walls of prejudice than the most persuasive apologetic. The writer of Hebrews reveals yet another dimension to the gift of hospitality: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb. 13:2). The author is referring to the time Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers into their home with lavish hospitality, and as a result, they received far more than they gave (Gen. 18:1-33). Their guests were in fact angels sent by the Lord to deliver the good news to this barren couple that they would soon give birth to a son.

Who Will Welcome Jesus?

As we transition back to the gospel of Luke, hospitality becomes Luke's overarching theme as Jesus makes his final journey to Jerusalem. When the disciples entered a Samaritan village Luke writes, "the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem" (9:53). Following his rejection by the Samaritan community, a blustery lawyer sought to expose Jesus' radical view of welcoming those outside Israel into the kingdom with a test question, "Who is my neighbor?"

Not to be taken in, Jesus tells a parable to demonstrate what authentic hospitality looks like in the actions of a Samaritan, who puts his own life and resources at risk for a stranger he does not know. His extraordinary compassion is set in stark contrast to the religious priest and Levite whose avoidance keeps them ritually pure, but disconnects them from all that is human. In the end the lawyer is forced to confess that "it is his hated enemy who is the hero with a human heart."¹ Jesus tells him if he wants a share in the age to come (i.e. eternal life) he must "go and do likewise" (10:37).

After such a cold reception in Samaria and a devious confrontation with Israel's elite, we wonder who will put their lives at risk and extend hospitality to Jesus?

Luke ends the suspense and invites us into a home where Jesus is finally welcomed and his message received. But as Tom Wright warns us, "If you thought 'the good Samaritan' was radical, this powerful little story suggests Luke has plenty more where that came from."² The heroes that Luke sets forth as models of the kind of hospitality that Jesus seeks are women. And just like Abraham and Sarah, what they receive in return is far greater than anything they could have given. Though our text is just five verses, it is worthy of serious reflection. As we examine the text I want you to place yourself in the story and to consider several questions that lie beneath the surface of the text.

Hospitality in Bethany

Now as they went on their way, he [Jesus] entered a [certain] village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. (Luke 10:38-39 ESV)

Luke briefly sets the stage. As Jesus is on the way, he enters a certain *village* where he is welcomed into Martha's *home* where he is served a meal. Jesus' movement from the public to private sphere suggests how intimate God desires to be with us, and the necessity to create a sacred place where we allow God to speak. In Luke's gospel it is in the most private and intimate setting of table fellowship that Jesus often reveals his identity, not to mention the motives of others around the table.³ Our present story is no exception.

We know from John's gospel that the locale is Bethany, about three kilometers east of Jerusalem. The village was situated on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, near the road that led from Jerusalem to Jericho described in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Because of Bethany's close proximity to Jerusalem, N. T. Wright observes that,

The incident can't, therefore have taken place at this point in the story, but Luke has placed it here to alert us to something special about Jesus' work. Not only was he redrawing the boundaries of God's people, sending out a clear message about how the gospel would reach to those outside the traditional borders. He was redrawing the [cultural] boundaries between men and women in Israel.⁴

Two Sisters

Martha's name is the feminine form of "lord, master" and thus means "matron," or "mistress," which suggests that she was a woman of means, prosperous and independent. Luke's language suggests that she is the one who is definitely in charge—it is her house (though it was Mary's village, John 11:2), "to her" belonged a sister and her actions indicate that she is not the slightest bit shy about insuring things remain in their proper order. Martha's sister Mary is introduced by her submissive posture, eagerly listening at the Lord's feet. Though her posture may seem innocuous to us, it would have shocked a first century audience. As Wright makes clear,

In that culture, as in many parts of the world to this day, houses were divided into male 'space' and 'female' space, and male and female roles were strictly demarcated as well... The public room was where the men would meet; the kitchen, and other quarters unseen by outsiders, belonged to the women. Only outside, where little children would play, and in the married bedroom, would male and female mix. For a woman to settle down comfortably among the men was bordering on the scandalous.⁵

In Romania today we still experience settings where the women serving will not sit at table with their guests.

Two Ways

To sit at a teacher's feet was the posture of a disciple, one who sought to listen and learn in order to become like his teacher. In that world sitting at a rabbi's feet was exclusively a male role. But when Jesus enters Martha's home, Mary takes the initiative to seat herself ("*parakathezomai*" – the verb is in middle voice indicating reflexive action) beside Jesus so that she can listen to his teaching. [A literal translation — "who, after she had taken her place at the

Lord's feet, kept listening to what he said."⁶] There was something so attractive about Jesus that Mary was freed from all cultural restraints. I don't think this was a brash, public protest on her part. I believe she experienced such a powerful sense of unconditional acceptance and love that to sit herself at his feet was the most natural and honoring response she could possibly give. As Wright explains, it was a woman's response to the voice of love.

Jesus' valuation of each human being is based not on abstract egalitarian ideals, but on the overflowing love of God, which, like a great river breaking its banks into a parched countryside, irrigates those parts of human society which until now have remained barren and unfruitful. Mary stands for all those women who, when they hear Jesus speaking about the kingdom, know that God is calling them to listen carefully so that they can speak of it too.⁷

The fact that no males other than Jesus are mentioned in our story may be Luke's way of depicting Mary's singular focus. If the disciples are present, and I assume they are, she is oblivious to them. Jesus' teaching transcends all other influences. The reason is, of course, that Mary is listening to the words of the Lord. Note that Luke uses the term "Lord" three times in the text. If we use our memory to fill in the theological significance of this moment, we should be amazed that the God who spoke face to face with Moses on Mount Sinai is now the one speaking face to face with Mary. It is a wondrous moment.

But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." (Luke 10:40)

But as in most homes, it doesn't take long for family dynamics to rise to the surface and shatter the idyllic joy of the moment. While Mary is sitting at the master's feet enraptured with his teaching, Martha is a bit miffed that she has been left all alone in the kitchen to do all the preparations for the meal. Given the numbers that Jesus brought with him, you can imagine the task was overwhelming. Now Martha is not shy about calling a spade a spade. She leaves her work, steps right up to Jesus and directs him to intervene and solve the situation. Her question, "Do you not care," though it anticipates a "yes" answer, "places the Lord in the position of potentially being insensitive to the fact she has been abandoned by her sister."⁸ But in her attempt to win Jesus' support against her sister, she actually condemns herself, as her protest is all about herself ("*my* sister," "left *me*," "help *me*") and not about attending to her guest. Joel Green comments, "Though she refers to Jesus as 'Lord,' she is concerned to engage his assistance in her plans, not to learn from his."⁹ We must never attach the name of the "Lord" to our own agendas.

One Thing

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:41-42)

Jesus' correction is tender, yet firm. He gently affirms her in her assessment of her condition and empathizes with her feeling of being overwhelmed. But the problem is not that Mary has abandoned her, leaving her alone in her service; rather it is that Martha has made her service more important than her guest. So much so that the "many things" have pulled her away from listening to the Lord's voice. "Her

service is marked by distractions and worry that conflict with growth and authentic faith.”¹⁰

Rather than being miffed at Mary for abandoning her in her service, Martha should look to her as an example of true disciple. Mary has forsaken “the many things” for the sake of the “one thing,” the good portion, the best meal. The most important thing about hospitality is to attend to the guest, and in this case the guest is a prophet, and more than prophet; Jesus is Israel’s long-awaited King who is inaugurating the kingdom of God on earth. And it is his desire to serve them a meal that leads to eternal life. As Green concludes, “With Jesus’ presence the world is being reconstituted, with the result that Mary (and with her, those of low status accustomed to living on the margins of society) *need* no longer be defined by socially determined roles.”¹¹

The double vocative, “Martha, Martha,” is an encouraging touch. When God repeats someone’s name it is a sign that he is inviting him or her to a new and greater calling (Samuel, Jacob, Paul). Rather than allowing Mary to be rebuked and return to service in the kitchen, he is inviting Martha to forget the meal for now, and take her seat alongside Mary to become a disciple of the King of Kings.

Five Questions to Ponder

1. Have you accepted God’s invitation?

In the book of Revelation Jesus gives an invitation to the church of Laodicea. Despite their lukewarm commitment, Jesus challenges them to become true disciples that enjoy an intimate relationship with the Lord. All they do is but repent and “open the door.” Jesus’ invitation calls out to us as well.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Rev 3:20)

Jesus answered him, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

2. Are you listening?

Jesus can be in your village, even your home, but that doesn’t mean you are hearing his voice. You can come to church every week and still not hear his voice.

3. Why can’t you hear his voice?

It is not because God is unwilling to speak that we are unable to hear his voice. Instead, more often than not, we are like Martha. Jesus is speaking to our hearts, but we allow ourselves to be pulled away by countless distractions (secondary things), which keep us from enjoying the one necessary thing. After our first parents sinned they heard “the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of day” and hid themselves by taking cover among the trees (Gen 3:8). The trees that God made were not evil; they were part of God’s good and beautiful creation (“pleasant to the sight and good food”). Similarly, we often hide from God’s penetrating voice by keeping ourselves pre-occupied doing “good” things.

Or it may be that we can’t hear because we have been deeply wounded with a pain that won’t go away. The pain can block us from hearing the Lord’s voice, partly because we think that he was in some way responsible for it happening; or, being sovereign, he could have prevented it from happening. Thus we find it difficult to trust God and open ourselves to him.

4. How is the barrier broken?

God loves us and desires to be intimate with us, however he will never force his love upon us. In the story, Jesus doesn’t do anything when Martha allows other priorities to pull her away from listening to him. Instead he waits until Martha is utterly overwhelmed by her own choices and takes the initiative to vent her anger on Jesus, asking him to intervene. It is then that Martha hears Jesus’ voice.

I met with a young woman in Romania who was grieving over sexual abuse she experienced when she was young. She had gone through several years of counseling to process the pain, but was still frustrated that she felt blocked in her relationship with the Lord. She explained that she had been able to articulate her anger about the individual involved, but didn’t know what to do next. I encouraged her that she needed to express her anger and hurt directly to God and allow him into that place to cleanse, purify and heal her. She courageously took up the challenge right then and there. She prayed in a way she had never prayed before – the type of prayer Israel’s poets call lament. She held back nothing of her pain-drenched memories and years of accumulated sorrow that had robbed her of her childhood. Her lament was both raw and respectful as she lay her heart open and gave voice to what seemed like betrayal by an all powerful, loving God. When she finished, I asked her to sit quietly and give God as much time to speak with her as she had spoken to him. After twenty minutes or so I came back to where she was sitting. She looked up at me and said, “I think I heard him say, ‘I was there.’”

5. How does God receive us?

Whenever we come to him honestly and courageously, he never responds to us in anger. Instead he welcomes us and receives us with tenderness and grace. John tells us in his gospel, “Now Jesus loved Martha” (John 11:5). But though he loves us, he refuses to allow us to control others in order to fix our problems. Nor does he save us by helping us manage our “many things.” Instead, he invites us to a higher calling, to “let go” of our “self-serving” expectations and follow him as his disciple. Having been set free of the tyranny of “many” things, we are able, like David in Psalm 27, to enjoy the “one thing”.

**One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple. (Psalm 27:4)**

A year ago I was on sabbatical and for two weeks I stayed at a friend’s home on the island of Oahu. Each morning I would get up at 5:30 am and take their golf cart out to the lagoon and stand on the edge of the coral reef and watch God take out his palette and paint the dawn in its manifold greys, pinks and blues. Sometimes I would pray, but mostly I was just there to watch the array of luminous lights and changing colors circle overhead, sunrise after sunrise. When I returned home I noticed a small slice of sacred silence had entered my normally harried soul. And out of the silence an inaudible voice that kept saying “one thing,” “one thing.” And it didn’t go away. Though I still battle my compulsive tendencies and am easily distracted, it has prevented me from doing many “good” things, so that I can welcome Jesus to sit at my table and listen to his voice.

Your testimonies are wonderful;
 therefore my soul keeps them.
 The unfolding of your words gives light;
 it imparts understanding to the simple.
 I open my mouth and pant,
 because I long for your commandments.
 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
 as is your way with those who love your name.
 Keep steady my steps according to your promise,
 and let no iniquity get dominion over me.
 Redeem me from man's oppression,
 that I may keep your precepts.
 Make your face shine upon your servant,
 and teach me your statutes.
 My eyes shed streams of tears,
 because people do not keep your law. (Ps 119:29-36)

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina, Vol. 3, The Gospel of Luke* (ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J.; Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 175.

2. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 129.

3. "Nelson observes how often in the Third Gospel scenes at the table function to disclose both the identity of Jesus and the hearts of those with him at the table (7:36-50; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 14:7-24; 22:21-23)." Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 436, footnote #144.

4. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 130.

5. Ibid.

6. "parakathesomai" – "sit beside" BAGD, 1973, 622.

7. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 131.

8. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 2:9:51-24:53* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1041.

9. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 437.

10. Ibid., 436.

11. Ibid., 437.

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