

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Luke 10:38-42

Year C - Proper 11, Text: Luke 10:38-42
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Some preliminary thoughts:

In Luke 8:1–3, we read of Jesus, while Jesus is still in Galilee, traveling “through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and some women... who provided for them out of their means.” Luke wants his readers to know who paid for “the Jesus movement” when it was small and vulnerable.

Later, in Luke 9:51, we read of Jesus leaving Galilee to travel to Jerusalem. He eventually enters Bethany and Bethphage on the Mount of Olives in 19:29.

One wonders where Mary and Martha were living when the narrative outlined in Luke 10:38–42 took place. John 11 states that they lived in Bethany. However, what matters is the narrative’s theology rather than its geography. Perhaps Luke is juggling the geography to focus on a very important insight: Jesus is redrawing the boundaries between men and women in Israel.

Verse 10:38: Jesus enters an unnamed village and goes to the house of Martha.

Verse 10:39: Martha has a sister called Mary “who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to His teaching.” In Acts 22:3, Paul speaks of himself as having been brought up at the feet of Gamaliel. To “sit at the feet” of a rabbi meant that one was a disciple of that rabbi. In sitting at Jesus’ feet, Mary was asking Jesus if He would accept her as a student. Obviously, His answer was “yes.” He accepts her as a student — a rather radical event in those days when women were supposed to focus on housework, cooking and cleaning!

Furthermore, to sit at a rabbi’s feet was what you did if you yourself wanted to become a rabbi. Mary has indicated her desire to become a teacher and preacher of the Good News of the Kingdom of God. In permitting Mary to sit at His feet, Jesus says, “I accept your request.” Mary stands for all those women who, when they hear Jesus speaking about the Kingdom of God,

know that God is calling them to listen carefully so that they might teach and share His message.

Verse 10:40: Martha is obviously distracted from Jesus’ teaching by her cooking. Obviously, she is focusing on the need to have someone help her prepare the meal. However, her sister is seated with the men and has become a student of Rabbi Jesus.

Martha’s mind is spinning! There is much more happening here than her sister’s lack of help. Martha was thinking, “My sister has joined a group of men. What ever will the family and the neighbors think? Who will marry her if she persists in this? This is too much for me to cope with!” She asks Jesus to tell Mary to focus on her real role and responsibilities!

Verse 10:41: Jesus responds to the implications of Martha’s request. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.” Martha’s sense of anxiety betrays where her faith and thoughts were at.

Verse 10:42: Jesus continues, “I understand the full list! However, one thing — and one thing alone — is needed: not a greater variety of food but that you understand that I am providing the real food and that your sister has already chosen the good portion. I will not allow you to take it from her. A good student is more important to me than a good meal.”

The word portion can mean a portion of food at a meal. Jesus is defending Mary’s right to become His disciple and continue her “theological studies.” Jesus declares the traditional cultural separation between men and women to be a thing of the past!

The real problem between Martha and Mary was not Martha’s workload in the kitchen. The real problem was that Mary was behaving as if she were a man. In Jesus’ day, houses were divided into male space and female space, and male and female roles were strictly demarcated. Mary had crossed an invisible but very important boundary within the house and another equally important boundary in the social world.

In a house, the “public room” was where the men would meet. The kitchen and other quarters, unseen by outsiders, belonged to the women. Male and female would only mix outside where their children played, and in their bedroom. For a woman to settle down comfortably among the men was bordering on the scandalous. The issue at stake in all this was not superiority and inferiority. It was a matter of what was thought to be appropriate between the two halves of humanity.

As Jesus goes up to Jerusalem, He leaves behind Him towns, villages, households, and individuals who have seen a glimpse of a new message of the Kingdom of God and for whom life will never be the same again. God grant that as we ponder this story, the same will be true for us!