

Martha: She Was a Perfect Hostess

[Luke 10:38-42](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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There can be no doubt that Martha comes off second-best in this story. It's Mary who earns our Savior's commendation. But next Thursday evening, after setting and decorating the table, cooking the turkey and the trimmings, serving the meal and cleaning up afterward, many of you will be in Martha's corner. If, as Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better part" by sitting in on his seminar, Martha chose the necessary part, and I, for one, rise up in her defense.

Because, for starters, MARTHA WAS THE HOSPITABLE ONE in that family. Martha, not Mary, answered the doorbell when Jesus arrived that day. "A woman named Martha welcomed him into her home," Luke says. It was Martha who opened her arms to Jesus and said, "Welcome!" It was Martha who ushered him into the house and invited him to make himself comfortable. Her very name, "Martha," means "sovereign lady." And here she is, living up to her name: the sovereign of the home welcoming the Sovereign of the universe for dinner.

This, by the way, was not the only time Jesus used Martha's home as a Bed and Breakfast. According to John 11, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." That kind of love doesn't just spring out of nowhere. It must have been the result of frequent visits and long acquaintance. I can hear Martha issuing a standing invitation: "Jesus, any time you're in the area, feel free to stop by. Your room will always be ready for you." Note further that John doesn't even mention Mary by name. It's "Martha and her sister and Lazarus." So in the Gospel of John, Mary takes a back seat to Martha, perhaps because Martha was so warmly and winsomely hospitable.

Christian hospitality is more than a handshake at the front door and hors d'oeuvres in the living room. In the words of the late Henri Nouwen, Christian hospitality means "the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend..." Hospitality allows others to be who they are, "free to sing their own songs," Nouwen says, "speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations."

Parents, show this kind of hospitality to your children. Yes, you cook and clean for them. Yes, you buy their clothes and pay their tuition. But you don't own them. They are your guests. One day they will pack up their CDs and their Sony Playstations and leave home. In the meantime, your mission is to prepare them for that day. You are not to dictate, but to help them discover for themselves who they are and what they will do with their lives, so they may "leave," as Nouwen put it, "to follow their own vocations."

Christians, let us show this kind of hospitality to people from other countries. It may be more difficult since 9/11, but it is nevertheless our nation's great privilege to host countless thousands from around the globe. I commend the thirty-five families who invited international students from American University to sit at their Thanksgiving tables next Thursday. Your gracious hospitality will turn a stranger into a friend. And your expressions of thanksgiving to God in the name of Jesus Christ may sow a seed that will someday blossom into faith in our Savior. Did you know that a large number of world leaders were educated in the United States? Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, was educated at Macalester College, one of our Presbyterian schools. The former president of Zimbabwe studied at American University. A former minister of education in Trinidad/Tobago studied at Howard University. Georgetown University claims a member of parliament in Uruguay, the former vice premier of Taiwan, King Hussein of Jordan, and President Gloria Arroyo of the Philippines. Seven of the top ten countries that send students here are closed to Christian missionaries. We cannot go to them but they come to us. So let's be missionaries while they are here. Let's not end our hospitality on November 27.

I honor Martha, secondly, because SHE WAS THE HELPFUL ONE in the family. Someone, after all, has to do the shopping, set the table, serve the meal, and clean up afterward. And Martha did it; she was the helpful one.

I am fully conscious of the Marthas in this church who allow me to be a Mary. If I had to type all my letters, produce all the bulletins, clean the sanctuary, prepare communion, arrange these lovely flowers, run the copy machine, answer the telephones, and repair the computers, I would have no time to sit at Jesus' feet in prayer, no energy to study the Scriptures, no stamina to teach and preach. What you do may be hidden but it is very helpful, and I am very thankful.

I am also thankful at this season for all the Marthas in our society whose service goes unnoticed and is too often unheralded. When I gaze at this city, at the tall apartment buildings, the busy hotels, the government offices, the never-ending flow of busses, taxis, cars, planes and trains, I am amazed by the intricate and complex network of utilities and services that support life in the city. I'm thankful for the people who keep the water running so I can take a hot shower every morning. I'm thankful for postal workers who deliver our mail, for truck drivers who supply the stores where we shop, for correspondents who gather news, often at the risk of their lives, for stevedores who offload cargo ships, for sanitation engineers who pick up our garbage. Because what they do is unglamorous and commonplace you won't see them on CNN Headline News. But I'm very thankful for them, and I know you are too. They, like Martha, are the helpful one who keep our communities viable and intact.

And here is another reason I like Martha. SHE HUNG IN THERE even after she came in second. Had I been Martha I might have said, "Well, Jesus, if you think Mary has chosen the better part by sitting around studying the Bible, then that's what I'll do too. And the next time you come our way you'll just have to call Dominoes because I won't have time to cook your dinner."

But Martha said nothing of the kind. According to the Gospel of John (12:1ff) Jesus paid another visit to this home just two weeks before he died. And here is John's report: "There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served..." So she wasn't demoralized by Jesus' remark in Luke 10. She hung in there. Cooking was her special gift, and when Jesus came again, Martha served.

Perhaps Martha was not a student. Perhaps she couldn't think and reason as well as Mary could. It happens all the time with siblings. One will be left-brained and post a 4.0 GPA while the other, being right-brained, skips college so she can paint landscapes or play in a combo or write poetry or go to a culinary institute. In my Alpha group last Wednesday a proud mother told me about her two children. One couldn't wait to go to college, while the other skipped college and went off to become an artist. And today that one is illustrating children's books and doing it very successfully. Our Lord wants you to do what you are gifted to do, so you can make your unique contribution to the welfare of the world.

I believe that's what Jesus was implying when he repeated her name, "Martha, Martha." It's as if he were saying, "Martha, you ask if I care? I care deeply, and I'm sincerely grateful for all you do. Even I, the Son of God, need a place where I can take off my sandals and put my feet up. I'm a long way from home, Martha. I need to hear the clatter of pots and pans, I like the chatter of friendly conversation, I'm hungry for your leg of lamb. So hang in there, Martha. I need what you do for me just as Mary needs what I do for her."

Someone out there needs what you can do for them. A helping hand, a listening ear, a thoughtful word. A hot casserole, a lift to the doctor, an hour of respite care. It may not be very glamorous. It won't put you on the cover of People magazine. But it will earn this tribute from your Savior: "Well done, good and faithful servant. As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." And when all is said and done, can we ask for anything better than that?