

She Yelled at Jesus!

A Meditation on Luke 10:38-42

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Lord, do you not care...? Tell her to help me!" – Luke 10:40

Luke is the only one to tell this story. Hard to believe it got past the editors and into the Bible. She yelled at Jesus! Martha did! Completely lost her composure. Unleashed her rage. Attacked him where he was most vulnerable. It was ugly.

Oh, I do not know if she shouted at Jesus from the top of her lungs, red faced, fists shaking...or if she gave him an eyebrow raised, piercing eyed, terse lipped, lowered voice, seething tongue lashing – an intense alternate form of yelling, only worse. But I do know the G-rated English translations of this embarrassing moment have toned down the raw emotions for genteel ears.

Take a closer look at the critical verse 40: "But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked..." Yes, she was getting supper ready; but at this point in the translation, the natural reading is that she has been trying to listen while she is working, hears something Jesus says to Mary, maybe not quite catching it all, stops, and emerges from the kitchen to ask what he means. The Greek, however, paints a different scenario.

The word rendered "she came to" -- *epistasa* -- means "she attacked," "she assaulted," "she confronted." It derives from two Greek words meaning "she stood above," "she stood upon," "she stood over." It carries a sense of unexpected surprise – like suddenly being overcome, pelted by the driving rain of a cloudburst or hard ice of a hailstorm. It also carries a sense of proximity, of nearness – including the she-was-in-his-face kind.

An inquisitive Martha does not approach Jesus. Martha assumes a posture of power, superiority, dominance over him. Abruptly, she bursts out of the kitchen, physically placing herself above Jesus, looking down at Jesus, exploding at Jesus: "Lord, do you not care..."

Not a question but a reprimand. Martha yells at him: "You don't care about me, do you, because if you had even an ounce of caring in you, you..." Oh, my! Does anyone hear echoes of heated exchanges at home over the years? "You don't love me! Not really. Because if you loved me, you would..."

Martha verbally rebukes Jesus where it would hurt him most. She lashes out at his concern, his caring, his compassion -- the base of his identity, the core of his teaching, his reason for being. Ever spewed out a torrent of hurtful words you later wished you had never unleashed? I suspect Martha, later, very much regretted her essentially calling Jesus a hypocrite...

...but in the heat of that moment, Martha meant every word she said, for she followed them up, without so much as catching her breath, by “saying to Jesus” – no, that’s another meek and mild misleading rendering of the Greek – by ordering Jesus to command her good-for-nothing sister to get up off her lazy behind and get out in the kitchen!

Wow! How did things deteriorate to that point?

Jesus and his entourage have arrived in Bethany, on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, just a few miles from Jerusalem. They go to Martha’s house where, as the head-of-household, she is responsible for providing hospitality – for welcoming Jesus in, letting him freshen up, feeding him a meal...

Notice Jesus does not go to Martha’s house alone. The twelve disciples (and likely assorted others in his entourage) have come knocking on her door as well. We are not talking about a friend who drops by and stays for supper. We are not talking about a couple long-lost relatives and their children appearing on our doorstep for a surprise visit, where we add more water to the soup, cut the meat in half, and stretch the side dishes.

This is like the entire football team or marching band showing up at your house hungry. We are talking about putting every leaf in the table, unfolding the card tables, opening the TV-trays, raiding the cupboards, running to the market... It takes lots of effort to host lots of people.

So, Martha goes to work preparing the food, assuming her sister, Mary, will help her out. Only Mary does not don an apron. Instead, she sits at Jesus’ feet and listens. The longer Mary sits there, the more Martha stewes about it. Mary not lifting a finger. Martha working her fingers to the bone. The unfairness gets under Martha’s skin and gnaws away. So much to do and Mary, in the next room, not doing a thing. Aggravation and anger simmer into resentment and rage, until they finally boil over in wrath and indignation.

Martha bursts out of the hot kitchen, brow sweaty, hair limp, flour up to her elbows. She does not stand off to the side, smiling through clenched teeth, trying to catch Mary’s eye and signal she needs her help. Nor does she unobtrusively kneel and whisper in Mary’s ear, in language siblings understand, that it is high time for Mary to do her share. No, she yells so everyone hears!

However, Martha takes out her anger, not on Mary, but on Jesus. She displaces her fury with her sister onto her honored guest. She tries forcefully to triangulate Jesus into the conflict. Martha reprimands the very guest to whom she is supposed to extend hospitality.

I bet the room got quiet then! How will Jesus react? Will he walk out the door? Will he defend himself? Will he take Martha's side and say something to Mary? Will he put Martha in her place? Will he throw up his hands: "Hey! I am not getting in the middle of this family feud."

Jesus responds: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things." True, though I suspect not immediately well-received. Worry and distraction do cause people to act out. Jesus understands how that happens. He does not belittle Martha. To the contrary, the words Jesus chooses to capture Martha's worry and distraction carry strong connotations.

The word for "worry," elsewhere in scripture, describes the anxiety of those hauled before authorities for imprisonment or execution. The word for "distraction," only found here in the bible, describes the alarm that sets in when someone falls from an upper story window.

Jesus does not believe Martha is sweating over the small stuff. He neither patriarchally pats Martha's hand to calm her, nor dismiss her as a hysterical female like a chauvinist sexist would do. No, Jesus recognizes Martha's efforts have been in service to her guests. In the Greek, he calls her work "ministry." He recognizes and values her efforts. He understands she has been doing her best to extend hospitality – as God requires.

But Jesus also acknowledges that the stress of not being able to juggle all that must be done, of being pulled in too many directions, of having too much on her plate is overwhelming her.

Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things.
There is need for only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part.

Since that is among the most misinterpreted verses in Luke, let me state what Jesus is not saying.

- Jesus is not saying that women should not interrupt men, as Martha did, but rather are to sit quietly and listen, like Mary, especially in church.
- Jesus is not saying, as the medieval theologians taught, that the contemplative life of the monastery is of a higher order than serving God out in the world.
- Jesus is not saying that theology is greater than practice; that personal piety is more important than public works; that worship, education, and justice are superior to governance, maintenance, and fellowship; or that individual spirituality is preferable to involvement in the church community.

Jesus values both Martha and Mary, seeing them equally engaged in attempting to be faithful. But he also is pointing out that, in a world filled with worries and distractions that can bring any of us to the breaking point, whether one is a Mary or a Martha, it is critical to keep our eye on the goal, to remember what God is trying to accomplish in and through us, to remain focused on what is most important.

President Ted Wardlaw of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary reminds us of a scene from the 1991 comedy *City Slickers*, starring Billy Crystal as one of three friends, tired of their oxford-collared buttoned-down shirt-and-tie corporate jobs, who vacation together helping cowboys herd cattle and hoping, in doing so, to find some meaning for their lives.

Jack Palance plays the role of Curly, the stereotypical chiseled-jawed cattle drive boss, whose “mean and he’s tough, and he can do anything with a rope or a whip or a knife. But in his tough and rugged way he’s also very wise.”

Writes Wardlaw:

Against the backdrop of an open sky and roughhewn mountains and clear streams and jaggedly beautiful scenery, [one of the three on vacation] turns to Curly and says with longing, “Your life makes sense to you.”

To which Curly replies: “You city folk. You worry a lot. How old are you? 38?”

“39” the man says.

“You all come up here about the same age. You spend fifty weeks getting knots in your rope and you think two weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it.”

He pauses a minute and then he goes on, “You know what the secret of life is?”

“No, what?” says the man.

And then Curly says, “One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that, and everything else don’t mean nothing.”

“That’s great,” says his companion, “but what’s the one thing?”

Curly looks at him for a minute, and says, “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”¹

¹ “Only One Thing” on Day 1, August 17, 1997.

https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200258a/only_one_thing