

Bible study reflection on Luke 10:38-42 on Hospitality

Martha and Mary

Introduction

Hospitality is a cultural issue in many societies. In Africa, for example in Uganda, there are many proverbs and stories that have been composed regarding hospitality. Ugandans believe that for any relationship to be strong, food must be served. Leaving someone's home without eating is very painful. Among the Samia of Uganda there is the proverb "olwiho luba munda", which is literally translated, "Relationship is in the stomach." In Luganda a tribe in central Uganda, the proverb is "olugenda enjala teruda", which means, "If a visitor leaves your home hungry he or she will never come back." This suggests that eating is a very integral part of hospitality in Uganda. Because of the importance of hospitality, emphasis is put on making sure things are done as culture demands. The focus of hospitality however, is directed towards meeting the needs of the guest.

Martha can be likened to a true and understanding Ugandan woman. She greets her guest and immediately disappears into a grass-thatched kitchen where the smoke becomes too much for the visitor to follow and engage in a conversation. All children will be called and each of them assigned responsibility just to make sure the meal gets ready faster. The visitor has to sit and wait until the meal is ready.

The story of Martha and Mary presents Jesus as a visitor in an intimate teaching relationship. The two sisters, Martha and Mary, loved Jesus so dearly. They wanted to give him the best. They were different. I have chosen to look at the essence of hospitality in this story. I will focus on three major issues: first, the duty of listening; secondly, setting priorities; thirdly, taking action upon the two above.

When Jesus entered Bethany, he was welcomed by Martha to a home he already knew.

According to the patriarchal society of that day, Martha was the ideal type of woman. She knew that a woman's place was in the home, taking care of the men of the family. Men were socially superior to women. Hence, she was worried about the details of cooking, and other tasks related to house keeping.

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Jesus is beginning to redirect Martha's focus from the comfort of the guest to listening to the guest (cf the welcome of a bishop in Uganda). Jesus is politely encouraging her to set priorities. With this cultural context in mind, Green, in his commentary on Luke,¹ says,

"With Jesus' presence the world is being reconstituted, with the result that Mary and those of low status accustomed to living on the margins of society need no longer be defined by socially determined roles. Martha and Mary and with them all must understand and act on the priority of attending to the guest before them, extending to Jesus and his messengers the sort of welcome in which the authentic hearing of discipleship is integral."

All must hear the gospel, irrespective of who they are and what culture says about them. Jesus transformed culture by allowing Mary, a woman, to sit and learn Scripture, which was not acceptable among the Jews. He similarly invites Martha to refocus her attention, not on faithfulness to culture, but on setting her priorities on Jesus. Jesus' encounter with Martha and Mary clarifies the nature of welcome he seeks, not only for himself but also for his messengers (and in this case, missionaries who actively participate in drawing people into God's kingdom). As a missionary, how have you refocused people's attention so that they can receive the gospel?

The duty of listening in hospitality

Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. This listening here is a two-

way process. Mary is listening to Jesus and Jesus is listening to Mary. Mary was quiet, contemplative and still. There is a song that says “Be still and know that I am the Lord”; Mary’s desire was to know more of the Lord rather than looking at the unnecessary details of hospitality. In 1877, when the CMS arrived in Uganda, Ugandans had little to offer; they did not know what the white man wanted. One thing they realized was that the white man had words of life. He saved them from the elaborate sacrifices to different gods and pointed them to one God. The greatest hospitality they offered was to sit and listen to the missionaries. They were called *abasomi*, which means “learners.” Some of them escaped from their homes, some left their work in the King’s court and came to learn. It would have been hard for the gospel to spread in Uganda if the Ugandans never took a step to listen. Listening is a very important aspect of discipleship. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to be with Jesus. Jesus called the twelve to be with him, and they listened.

Jesus commends Mary for choosing to listen to him and will not allow Martha to deprive her of the opportunity to do so. Jesus here is transforming the culture of hospitality into attention to the guest rather than a domestic performance. The appropriate hospitality offered to any guest, and in this case a missionary, is listening to God’s Word. It can be very disappointing if a missionary went out to preach and had no one to listen to him or her. Recently, we hosted a missionary at the University and she requested us to mobilize the students so that she could present her story to them. She had been very successful in other places, but this time the students did not listen. Ugandan students are not used to one person’s performance. They did not understand the story, she did not explain it at the beginning, and instead of listening there was a lot of murmuring in the congregation. Despite all the other kind of hospitality, she left very disappointed because the students failed to listen to her.

Alternatively, lack of listening to other people by the one presenting can cause the message to become irrelevant. Recently, missionaries came to a place near Kampala; it was a rural area and the people explained to them their needs. The missionaries had made up their minds to give these people a ‘gas toilet’, which they actually did. To this day, the gas toilet is still there, yet people cannot use it. They can’t afford to buy the gas. It is true that as a missionary there is need to listen to God, but we must also listen to the people

in order for them to make sense out of the gospel. In mission, we wish to not only communicate, but to have fellowship, form relationships and also to encourage one another. There is a need to allow a proper flow of communication between the missionary and the listeners. Lack of proper communication hinders the progress of the gospel.

Mary in this text is depicted as one who has begun the journey of discipleship by acknowledging through her posture her submissiveness to Jesus, listening to his Word. She is found at Jesus’ feet. Being at the feet is a very necessary posture for learning and understanding. Paul himself said “*I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in the city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our forefathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day*” (Acts 22.3). Throughout Luke and Acts, “sitting at his feet” indicates acknowledgement of authority. See Luke 7:38, 8:35, 41, 17:16, Acts 4:35, 37, 5:2—all incidents where people had to submit and acknowledge the authority of others. For Luke, listening to the Word at the feet of Jesus is to have joined the road to discipleship. Jesus said, “*Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like; he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when the flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built*” (Luke 6:47-48). Listening deepens our faith. Jesus said, “*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it*” (Luke 11:28).

Charles Wesley, on admiring Mary, said,

*“Oh that I could forever sit like
Mary, at the master’s feet: be this my
happy choice: my only care, delight and
bliss, my joy, my heaven on earth be
this, to hear the bridegroom’s voice.”*

Mary chose a fuller appreciation of the necessity of mystic communion with her Lord. It can be mysterious now that Jesus is not physically present with us, but we spiritually sit down as his guests and listen to him. In my country, most Christian families have a plaque on their walls with the words “Jesus is the head of this family, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation.” We believe in his presence always. He listens to us, and we too listen to him.

Setting clear priorities

Jesus required only a few preparations, which did not need to take Mary away from

listening. Jesus said to Martha, “*You are worried and upset about many things, one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will never be taken away from her.*” The “better” thing is to be understood as the teaching of Jesus or perhaps the blessing of the kingdom to which it testified. The psalmist in Psalms 16:5 says “*The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.*” Mary sought more grace and closer communion with God and Christ. For this portion, Mary was willing to suspend all the earthly cares. Those who seek this portion will never be disappointed and the portion will never be taken away.



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Mary acknowledges Jesus by listening to his Word rather than by providing excessively for his needs. In the gospel according to John 6:27, Jesus said, “*Do not labour for the food that perishes, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the son of man will give you. For on him God the father has set his seal.*” It was her inheritance. The portion that Mary chose was substantial, satisfying, real and long lasting. It was her inalienable right and possession, guaranteed by Jesus not to be taken away either by Martha or anyone else. Jesus is helping Martha to see the priority of issues which are not too much the details of hospitality, rather to be at the feet of the guest. Jesus’ meaning is emphasized by Howard Marshall in his commentary on Luke.²

“The welcome that Jesus seeks is not epitomized in distracted, worrisome domestic performance, but in attending to his guest whose very presence is a disclosure of the divine plan.”

Martha’s failure to set priorities is contrasted with Mary’s better choice of listening. Martha is engaged in many things, yet Mary is focused on only one thing. It is important to make priorities clear. Paul in Philippians 3:13 said, “*Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ.*” Jesus told the rich young ruler, “*One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; and*

come and follow me” (Luke 18:22). The Bible insists that God does not use people with divided attention.

The Greek term that Jesus uses for anxious means to be unduly concerned. It often expresses a worldly attitude due to unbelief and which can divert a person’s attention away from the proper things of God. Paul uses the same word in 1 Cor.7:32-35: *“I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord. But the married man is anxious about the worldly things, how to please his wife and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided attention.”* Paul is addressing people about issues less important in the kingdom of God. Similarly, Jesus uses the same word in Luke 12:26 and in Matthew 6:25-34 in order to draw people’s attention to the kingdom of God. We can be in a mission field but ever anxious about what is going to happen the following day back at home. We need to be focused and let those that we visit and those that visit us know that our priority is to present Jesus to them. Hospitality, practiced with the right focus, becomes a priority not because it is your culture but because it is a way of reaching people with the gospel.

Action

If we listen and set priorities, we also need to act according to the word heard. For instance, James 1:22-25 insists we must not only be hearers but also doers of the Word. In

Luke’s Gospel, hearing God’s Word and acting on it is of primary importance. For example, in Luke 8:1-21, there are three illustrations all concerned with hearing and doing: the parable of the sower, the lamp on the stand, and Jesus’ mother and brothers. In each case, hearing and doing is very crucial. In our recently ended annual University mission, students listened attentively and responded to the message by standing up and confessing their faith in Jesus Christ. One student said, “When the altar call was made I walked outside. Later, I heard the voice of the preacher calling me back. I walked to the altar, threw down the ring and found freedom.” Jesus called the disciples to be with him, but also that he might send them out. When we sit at the feet of Jesus, we must also be available to be sent. Obedience to act is very crucial here. Those who sat at the feet of missionaries as *abasomi*, “learners,” in Buganda turned out to be missionaries in their own country and beyond. They witnessed painfully, some died as martyrs, while others remained prominent native evangelists. The call to discipleship is a call to be sent. How are we preparing people to be sent?

In our service to the Lord, the story cautions us not to be anxious and agitated and dissatisfied with our fellow Christians or with our master; we should not busy ourselves with outward things so that we neglect the quiet worship of the Lord. It is very important to have spiritual communion with the Redeemer. Jesus invites us to a life of worship as well as practical service.

Conclusion

As we conclude, three things are crucial. First we must know the focus of our hospitality. What do we want people to understand

and what is our intention of going out? This will help to bring people’s minds to the Word of God more than other things.

As we set this focus, we need to understand why people behave the way they do. Martha was doing the right thing according to the Jewish culture. Although Jesus speaks positively about service and encourages a servant heart, it must be prioritized correctly. Jesus helped Martha to understand that his Word takes precedence over other family issues. He recommended that one thing was more important, and that was and is listening to his Word.

Secondly, we need to make our priorities clear. When I go out to the mission field, am I going with a double mind or a mind set on winning souls for Christ? Mary had her priorities clear and no one destabilized her concentration. We need to know our portion in the kingdom of God. Jesus as a guest had his priorities clear. He was not shaken by Martha’s request.

Finally, as we listen and set priorities, we must act accordingly. We need to allow God to transform our cultures for the glory and honour of his name.

Questions for discussion

1. How would you want to be welcomed when you go out for mission?
2. What are some of the issues that distract us from listening to God or other people?
3. What are some of the cross-cultural issues that would prevent people from listening to the gospel?
How has the culture of hospitality in whatever society hindered the reception of the gospel?
4. How do we help people who want to fulfill every aspect of their culture at the expense of listening to the gospel?
5. As a missionary, what comments can you make about both Martha and Mary’s hospitality to Jesus? <<

Endnotes

- 1 Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).
- 2 Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A commentary on the Greek text*, (Aberdeen: Paternoster, 1978).

