

on hospitality

Robert Steiner



- Vincenzo Campi

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preacher: Robert Steiner
scripture reading: Luke
10:38-42

“The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness ...” (Henri Nouwen)

This morning I would like to pick up on Henri Nouwen's suggestion to understand hospitality not so much as an experience of fullness, but more as a process that seeks to create emptiness. I bring to this conversation the familiar Gospel story of Mary and Martha, which in my view also tries to subvert the concept of hospitality, inviting in its own way a process of emptying for the sake of finding “the one thing that is needed.”

The irony of the story is that in the end we are not really told what the one thing is that is so badly needed. It rather represents a blank space, a gap

in the story, which you and I, the listeners and readers of the story all have to fill. And filled it has been by scholars throughout the centuries. I would like to think of their attempts as creative and helpful detours. They are clearly not *cul de sacs*, but detours, because all see something important and have become for me helpful signposts in the process of this biblical treasure hunt to find the one thing that is needed. I call them detours not in any derogatory sense. For life is full of detours and delays which bring about great frustration, but also lead to unexpected discoveries and new perspectives. They also remind us of how subjective interpretation is and that we need to admit that very often even the truth of “the one thing that is needed” can be rather complex and multifaceted. And such acknowledgement itself calls forth a process of emptying oneself, of humility and modesty, especially when we are thinking

about the scene presented to us at Mary and Martha's home: What does it mean to host Jesus, to invite him, into our home, our lives, our hearts, our very being?

The following detours are inspired by what the New Testament scholar Gerd Theissen described as “traps” in his analysis of the history of interpretation of this particular passage. Each approach will be considered in the light of a bigger movement from fullness to emptiness. I do so also with a particular sensitivity to Martha's role in the story. Her language of love is clearly “acts of service” and our own view of her should be as hospitable as possible, in order to not to frighten the Martha within each one of us. This will only lead to a defensiveness, that would stand in the way of personal transformation.

I therefore value Nouwen's considerations of hospitality not only as the perfect code of conduct for hosts, but also as an excellent hermeneutical advice to biblical interpreters: "Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories, and good works, but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit." He then concludes by talking about the paradox of hospitality in the way it wants to create emptiness, "not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free". (Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*)

Artistic depictions of the biblical scene take us on their own detour and help to create a special kind of emptiness by inviting us to identify with specific the characters of the story. I hope that the following paintings add their own energy and beauty to the process of re-framing of what is certainly one of the most well known and popular stories from our Scriptures.

The first detour: The preacher is not Jesus.

This is a dream come true for every preacher: You decide to come to church instead of doing your weekly shopping on a Sunday



-Maud Sumner

morning or giving your home a spring clean. You decide to listen to a sermon instead of sitting in your garden, sipping on a cup of coffee and going through the notes of tomorrow's lecture or finishing off a few long overdue emails. How tempting it is to identify yourself with Jesus as a preacher with a devout looking Mary as in our first painting. Is this not the most important thing that is needed? One should not be surprised that the story has been used by preachers to start a guilt trip forcing people come to church more regularly. And yet we know that some get out of bed early Sunday morning because they love the organ, the singing and the sense of being in community. Others appreciate the kind of networking a faith community offers. And yes, some come, with a sense of despair hoping that we would help them with paying for their shelter or a new pair of shoes.

Those thoughts have grounded my own understanding of what my role is as one of the hosts on a Sunday morning. I continue to being

taught the need for less self-importance, for emptiness in the sense of a spaciousness, that honors and celebrates all the elements and all the people that help to make our weekly gathering a life-giving experience. But there is another, more fundamental problem with simplistically translating this rather intimate scene between Mary and Jesus into a church setting. To fall into that trap would mark the beginning of the end of the Gospel. Beware of preachers and leaders, that assume the kind of authority Jesus had, or worse, who see themselves as the direct mouthpiece of God and expect you to receive their words as the ultimate and unquestionable Word of God. We always need to remember that even our Bible is not the Word of God as such, but a witness to the Word of God, a very male, patriarchal, and in that sense compromised witness. If we want to be theologically correct and responsible, then we should only speak of Jesus as the true embodiment of the Word of God. But now you have preachers or interpreters offering their own limited and subjective witness to this witnessed Word of God. I am truly amazed how God continues to inspire us through all those very human words and witnesses. One of God's main virtues must be patience, in the very sense we talked about a few weeks ago: slow to anger and long suffering.



I am surprised at the liberty with which the artist depicts our scene. We know that in Jesus' times it was not proper for a Rabbi to privately teach a woman. Here we see him do this in public, for everyone to see. But such freedom resonates with the outrage Jesus caused by having female followers, who left their home and family in order to join his movement and learn from him. At the same time the artist locates this moment of teaching and learning outside of the city walls creating an idyllic garden setting. It might be a subtle indication of the way Jesus' moved outside of the conventions of his own time taking us back into a paradise like place which breathes harmony and innocence.

This first detour takes us a step closer to understanding what is needed most according to Jesus. Taking time to hear and to listen to someone speak is seen as something positive. Such contemplative hearing is contrasted to doing. And we know that any form of activism needs to be balanced with times of reflection and contemplation in order to be sustained.

The second detour: There is a time for compromise and there is a time for a radical either-or.

Our natural response is to side with Martha and to argue that both are acting out of good and sincere motives. After all it was G.K. Chesterton who maintained that "All true friendliness begins with fire and food and drink". And are we not burdened with a history of neglect and disregard for the work that is done by those who stay at home. There are justifiable sensitivities! And some would argue that the conversation between Jesus and a scribe preceding our scene in fact highlights the importance of both loving God and loving the neighbor as oneself, in other words emphasizing the need for both intimacy with God and concrete acts of love towards our fellow human beings. Does Mary not represent the former and Martha the latter? Do they not in some ways beautifully complement each other and thereby illustrate both sides of the commandment to love? Interestingly some of the early scribes who copied the Gospel

manuscripts must have felt in a similar way. And so we have English translations of the story that follow those particular Greek manuscripts and suggest an alternative reading. Instead of Jesus saying that "only one thing is needed", we now hear a softening in Jesus' response. After having told Martha that she is worried and upset about many things, Jesus continues to say: "But few things are needed - or indeed only one." In other words: Don't overdo it, Martha. Less food will also do. Don't worry about so many things and rather focus on what is really important.

Theissen cautions us to go with such reading which clearly tries to take off the uncomfortable edge of Jesus's warning. He points out why such a compromise does not reflect the kind of reasoning the writer of Luke must have been acquainted with. The story line contrasts the many with the one: Martha worries about a lot, but Mary only about the one. But in antiquity, when the many and the one is contrasted, then unity is always regarded as something positive, while plurality is seen as something negative. Such a contrast does not make room for much of a compromise.

One could ask now if such an either-or position agrees with the kind of emptiness Nouwen envisages. Does this still leave space for Martha to change or does it create a dividing line which hinders transformation. Is she then not being cornered in a way which will only provoke hurt and resentment?

We need to note that Martha is described in very sympathetic tones. Her desire to be the perfect host weighs heavily on her. Our pew bible reads that she was "distracted" by all the demands that come with being a good host. The word distraction carries very negative overtones. A more literal translation of the Greek word would be that she is "pulled into all directions." The focus then is not so

much on her inability to focus, but rather on her state of being completely overwhelmed and exasperated. Her call for help is not driven by pettiness or jealousy, but rather by a feeling of sudden panic, of not coping by herself. And again we are also dealing with a very biased translation in our pew bible, which refers to her, in Jesus' words, as „fretting and fuzzing about many things.“ Meanwhile one should rather translate those Greek adjectives with being „anxious and troubled“. It also makes Jesus look more sympathetic and less pathetic.

And yet there can be times when one has to have the courage to take a more one-sided position for the sake of being truly heard and understood. The philosopher Walter Benjamin was once accused of being inconsistent. His response was that he does not want to be consistent, but radical.



-Rembrandt

But such a radical decision does not need to lack compassion and can also offer the space that is needed to allow for change. Rembrandt's rendering of the story illustrates this well. He beautifully positions Jesus between Martha to the left and Mary to the right. In fact, Jesus sits a little bit closer to Martha and is turned towards her in a way which signals care and compassion. We do not get a sense of Jesus condemning or judging her. His posture is slightly turned forward. His eyes are looking down, not fixed at her. In the same way Martha has turned slightly towards Jesus. Her eyes are also looking down. It is as if both are looking at the same invisible thing that deeply connects them. It is a shared moment of silent reflection and companionship expressing empathy and mutual understanding. Mary is no longer listening. She is absorbed in the book she reads. Jesus' full

attention is now devoted to Martha. One wonders, does Rembrandt side with those interpreters and scribes who prefer some form of compromise. Or is it rather a matter of how the either-or position is communicated. As long as Martha knows that Jesus' words to her do not come from a place of having to be right, but from a place of genuine care and compassion. Confrontation does not have to mean humiliation. It can also be an invitation, the opening of a door which we didn't see before, but which was always there.

The second detour takes us another step closer to what Jesus might have meant when he said that only one thing is needed. It does not involve a compromise, but the boldness of taking sides and posing a radical either-or.

The third detour: Women, depart from traditional roles!



-Orazio Gentileschi

Gentileschi's painting introduces us to a very feisty and emancipated Mary. She will not listen to her older, commanding sister Martha. She refuses to help and does not want to miss out on the opportunity to listen to Jesus. Such an interpretation is not an anachronism. According to Theissen, when the Gospel of Luke was written, a stoic by the name of Musonius was in favor of women studying philosophy. In the middle of the second century the physician Galen praised the women among the Christians for demonstrating a philosophical attitude. We need to understand the story within that context. It is meant to give women the freedom to listen and learn in the congregation, without feelings of guilt, even if some criticized them for neglecting the work at home.

But also this interpretation does need a slight correction: Martha and Mary should not only be seen as presenting a contrast between a traditional and an emancipated role. One always needs to be

careful to not be too quick to read one's own perceptions into an ancient text. We need to acknowledge that within a strongly patriarchal setting both women act in an emancipated way. Martha welcomed Jesus into the house. Some manuscripts speak explicitly about *her* house. To welcome a man into one's house, presupposed independence, and certainly more so in the East than in the West of the Roman Empire. Furthermore

Martha directs her criticism of Mary directly at Jesus: Do you not care, that my sister leaves me alone with all the work? She criticizes a man. This does not fit a traditional female role. Vincenzo Campi's depiction of Martha clearly portrays her as a woman who knows what she is doing, competent, strong and in control. The kitchen is her territory. She is in her element.

In that way both women act in an unusual way!



-Vincenzo Campi

And this can also be said about Jesus. He affirms Mary when he congratulates her, saying that she has chosen what is good. He emphasizes her choice. She has chosen to learn from him. But Martha also made a choice. She chose to welcome Jesus. And

Jesus respects her decision. It is not a given, that men respect the choices women have made. The third detour takes us forward another step. We now know that the one thing that is needed calls for an independent choice and response, which might go against society's expectations and traditional norms.

The fourth detour: Integrating all aspects of our personality.

One tends to see parts of one's own life in all the actors of the story. And this is permitted. When reading or listening we always identify with different figures in the story: Mary is the part within us, who makes sure that we fulfill expectations that are made of us from the outside - be sure to be responsible, diligent, and dutiful. When welcoming guests we want to make a good impression. We do not want to embarrass ourselves. But this costs us a lot of strength, and sometimes demands of us more than we can give.

But then we also identify with Mary, our need for contemplative restfulness. It is the desire for something else besides the stress and pressure of demands made on us. It is about the yearning to live from deep within, to only do what we really have chosen to do. But this side of us cannot always grow and develop with a Martha within us, which keeps reminding us of our responsibilities and duties.



-Velazquez

Velazquez's portrayal of Martha captures a person who is deeply torn within herself. What is the role of the elderly person standing behind her. Is she telling her to finish her work in the kitchen and dare not think of joining Mary? Is this her troubled and guilt ridden shadow self? Or is this her demanding and controlling super-ego speaking? Mary's expression would then be one of deep inner turmoil, of struggling to break free from all those authority figures in her life that still hold her back to choose what she wants and needs. Or is the person standing behind her pointing to Jesus? Does her gesture symbolize those people and forces in her life that keep encouraging her to break free from the shackles of patriarchy? Is it a lack of confidence, of self-worth, that is holding Martha back? Do her hands cling to the kitchen pot in an attempt to resist the deep life-giving currents within herself, that want to set her

free? Is Jesus then that power and wisdom within us which wants us live our lives with greater integrity and courage? Is he the one who wants us to honor and appreciate both the Mary and Martha within us, encouraging us to integrate those parts of our personality which seem to be pulling us into opposite directions? We have taken another step in our understanding of what the one thing that is needed might be: It must have to do with an inner unity, a centre, which holds us and grounds us in the midst of all the challenges that daily life poses.

The one thing needed

What if the one thing that is necessary refers to the one and only God. The Greek original does not have to be translated as "only one thing is needed" but can also be read as "only the One is needed". If we follow the

latter translation, then the phrase would be a reminder of Israel's confession of faith to the one and only God. And each detour we have taken has revealed an important aspect of this one God who is needed. This God is both our guest and our host, creating an emptiness and spaciousness which allows us to listen, to make radical choices, to move beyond traditional gender roles and to integrate opposite forces within ourselves.

Amen.