

Marthas without gender

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My grandmother died in 2005, on the eve of the feast of Saints Mary and Martha of Bethany. The next day I went to the weekday eucharist at St. James Cathedral in Chicago, and the story of Martha and her sister brought me instantly to tears. Like so many women of her generation (and not only hers), my grandmother was deeply identified with her hospitality and service. She was a lot like Martha, and I loved her for it.

I am more troubled now than I was then at the way this story is gendered in our reading. I have yet to meet an overworked male who felt implicated in this story, and I have yet to meet a woman who openly identifies with Mary rather than Martha.

I suspect this has a lot more to do with our own anxieties about gender than with Jesus, Luke, and their original audiences. It seems very hard for us to get past the idea that women in particular are evaluated—even by Jesus of Nazareth!—on their ability to rightly order domestic tasks. Jesus's words to Martha—"You are worried and distracted by many things. . . . Mary has chosen the better part"—have the ring, to our ears, of a general rebuke to the busy contemporary woman.

That's not a very good reading. I would hope men and women alike could see something liberating rather than scolding in Jesus's words to Martha.

In an earlier age it was thought that Jesus was preferring the "contemplative" life of prayer and silence over the "active" life of labor and family. But this is not a distinction I encounter when I read about Jesus's world. Rather, I have come to think of this passage as suggesting a reversal of that world's very traditional roles of guest

and host. It's a reversal that has been expressed in many and various ways through the history of the church, but one of my favorites is George Herbert's "Love (3)":

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, you shall be he...

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.

I do enjoy the thought of my grandmother, so long the host, being served by Love as a guest in the end.