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“But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27): *Women’s διακονία (diakonia) in Luke’s Gospel*

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As discussions on synodality continue in the church, the concepts of servant leadership and διακονία (*diakonia*) as well as the ministry of deacon (both male and female) are frequent topics. As the discernment continues, it is worth looking at the Gospel of Luke and, in particular, the women in Luke’s Gospel as they can throw much light on those subjects.

What does the word διακονία mean? Most translations of Luke’s Gospel describe it as ‘service’ with its corresponding verb ‘to serve’ and sometimes, it is also translated as ‘ministry.’ Greek New Testament Lexicon definitions include services of any kind, both at table and in religious situations.¹

Why focus on women when discussing διακονία in Luke’s Gospel? A very interesting statistic might begin to answer the question. The word διακονία or the verb διακονέω (*diakoneo*) is used nine times in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus refers to it in two of his parables (12:37; 17:8) and he uses it three times in crucial teaching immediately after the Last Supper (22:27, 28). In the four other times when it is used, it refers to women (4:38; 8:3; 10:40a, 40b). The Lukan Gospel never actually uses it about men. A careful examination of the passages about the women elucidates this.

THE HEALING OF SIMON’S MOTHER-IN-LAW (4:38-41)²

The first woman to encounter Jesus in his adult ministry is Simon’s mother-in-law (4:38-39). Jesus goes to Simon’s house, where he

1 The lexicon defines the verb as “(1) generally, of services of any kind *serve*; (2) of supplying with life’s necessities *support, take care of, minister to*; (3) of table service *wait on, serve*; (4) of religious service relating the physical needs of believers *serve as deacon, perform duties of deacon*.” Friberg, Friberg and Miller, *Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*.

2 All biblical references refer to Luke’s Gospel unless otherwise stated.

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has probably been invited for the main meal of the day which would take place after the Sabbath service and here he is asked to help the woman who has been struck down by a very serious fever. While the healing of the woman is the second miracle recounted in the gospel, it is the first one where the person is identified as an individual (even if that is only in relation to her son-in-law). This pericope takes place in the private arena of a house, where Jesus is shown great hospitality. He has just come from the synagogue where there have already been signs of antagonism towards him. The demon shouted at him when he performed the exorcism in the synagogue at Capernaum (4:34) and, before that, Jesus was rejected by his own people in the synagogue in Nazareth and driven out of the town (4:29). Careful examination of the text shows that Simon's mother-in-law is given a prominent place in the story as *πενθερά* (mother-in-law) is sandwiched between two mentions of Simon (4:38).

Jesus is presented as a very distant figure in the description of this healing. He does not speak to the woman. He stands over her, draws on God's power from on high and rebukes the fever. Rebuke is usually used to describe casting out evil spirits and it has been used in this way in the exorcism that has taken place in the synagogue immediately prior to this. The two miracles are described in a similar manner because Luke often sees physical illness as demonic and so treats it as similar to possession by unclean spirits. It shows that Jesus has authority over both demons and illness and is equipped to carry out the mission of release that he had announced in Nazareth. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:18-19).

When the fever releases Simon's mother-in-law, she responds immediately with service described by the verb *διακονέω*. This probably involves preparing and serving a meal for those present. In some households, the woman would have the responsibility for the preparation of the food, but would not always serve at table. Some religious regulations did not permit women to appear in front of strangers and, at other times, Sabbath restrictions prevented her from serving a rabbi.³ However, while she is not the householder/ the hostess, since the narrative makes no mention of both her son-in-law and daughter, she becomes the central figure in the household and is the person who epitomises both hospitality

3 Turid Karlsen Seim, "The Gospel of Luke," in *Searching the Scriptures: a Feminist commentary Vol II*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (London: SCM, 1995), 728-740, 740.

and service. She is in fact the first person to respond to Jesus since he began his ministry. At this stage there is no mention of Jesus having called any disciples to follow him and so, it could be said that Simon’s mother-in-law is the first person, male or female, who is reported as functioning as a disciple and following him.

The woman responds not just to Jesus by service but to the others who are with him as well. The others are obviously people who have been impressed by Jesus’ teaching or the exorcism that has just taken place in the synagogue or it may be Simon and some of his family. The woman now serves both Jesus and these people.

The woman’s serving foreshadows Jesus’ service later that day. Luke says that as evening arrived, people brought the sick to Jesus, who laid his hands on each of them and cured them (4:40). Interestingly, the verb *θεραπεύω* (*therapeuo*)⁴ that is used does not just signify ‘to cure’ but also ‘to serve.’ In fact, Luke gives it the meaning ‘to serve’ in Acts 17:25. The *διακονία* that Jesus models is a different type of service to that of the woman as he heals the sick that are brought to him and releases others from demons (4:40-41). However, by juxtaposing the two verbs, Luke shows the woman collaborating with Jesus in his work of healing and serving others. She ministers to them while Jesus heals them placing his hand on each. The ministry continues throughout the whole day as Jesus, the servant leader, is joined by the woman in that service and they model the ministry that has already been announced by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth (4:18-19).

GALILEAN WOMEN WHO FOLLOWED JESUS (8:1-3)

This short passage describes the Galilean women who followed Jesus and, along with the twelve, listened and learned to be disciples. They had encountered Jesus either through reports of his preaching and healing, through listening to his word or through being healed. They followed him in a very radical way by living a peripatetic life as they journeyed with him as disciples.

Among that group, a group of women who ‘provided for them out of their resources’ are mentioned (8:3). Once again the term service or *διακονία* is used. While Simon’s mother-in-law provided a meal and hospitality, the Galilean women develop the concept of *διακονία* still further by moving outside a household setting and expending resources and providing ongoing material support to Jesus and the group around him as they journey with him on the Way.

The women are a mixture of single, widowed and married women, but all provide in whatever way they can. “At a basic level,

4 Lexicon definitions include (1) To serve, be of service, (2) heal, (3) cure, (4) restore .” Friberg, Friberg and Miller, *Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*.

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then, the women materially aided the Jesus group with whatever ‘belonged to them,’ however meagre or munificent.”⁵ There is nothing to say that all the women are wealthy but neither are they all destitute. The group could contain wealthy women who could provide patronage, like Joanna (who came from Herod’s court), divorced or widowed women, who could contribute out of their *kettuba*⁶ or dowry and poorer women who could provide basic resources. Readers, having just followed the story of the woman who anointed Jesus where they saw largesse and generosity, now understand this pericope from that same generous perspective. Similar to the previous scene where the woman bought an extravagant alabaster jar of perfume, then broke it open, meaning that it could not be used again, and proceeded to anoint Jesus with actions that were far more lavish than normal hospitality (7:37-38), so here, readers presume that the women will provide with largesse out of their own resources. Like Jesus, they are willing to give with generosity.

As in the case of Simon’s mother-in-law, the women provide, not only for Jesus, but for the whole group, both male and female, travelling with him. “The women wait on each other as well as on Jesus and the Twelve and model *the mutual service* that the entire company is called to enact.”⁷ In this, they imitate Jesus and the broad concept of service that has already been evident in the scenes of healing, service and hospitality (4:40-44; 5:15; 5:17-26; 5:29; 6:18-19; 7:11-17).

A MUCH BROADER DEFINITION OF διακονία

At this stage in Luke’s Gospel, readers have encountered two types of διακονία, the household and table service of Simon’s mother-in-law and the broader provision of long-term financial and practical support offered by the Galilean women. An even broader understanding of διακονία can be seen in both the Gospel and Acts. Examples include service at table (4:39; 10:40; 12:37),

5 F. Scott Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: capable women of purpose and persistence in Luke’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 121. Sim agrees that the women came from different backgrounds but they pooled whatever resources they had to support the community. David C. Sim, “The Women followers of Jesus,” *HeyJ* XXX (1989): 51-62, 53.

6 “The *ketubah* restates the fundamental conditions that are imposed by the Torah upon the husband, such as providing his wife with food, clothing, and conjugal rights, which are inseparable from marriage. It includes the husband’s guarantees to pay a certain sum in the event of divorce, and inheritance rights obligatory upon his heirs in case he dies before his wife.” The *ketubah* contract was first formalised in the first century BCE by the Sanhedrin. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/465168/jewish/The-Marriage-Contract-Ketubah.htm

7 Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows*, 120.

providing resources (8:3; Acts 6:1), delivering a service (Acts 6:4) or being sent to carry out a service or perform a role (Acts 19:22). A recent study of *διακονία* recommends that the emphasis should be on the *motivation* for the work rather than the type of work involved and therefore it should not be seen primarily as a benevolent action on behalf of someone, but a sending “on behalf of the person or authority who mandated the activity.”⁸ Therefore, readers should see it as focusing on service of God, the one who has commissioned the action, rather than on any particular service.⁹ The women, whether serving at table or providing out of their own resources, are all motivated as followers of Jesus.

MARTHA AND MARY: FURTHER CLARIFICATION OF *διακονία*

Most commentators use the story of Martha and Mary (10:38-42) to make a comparison between the active and contemplative life or between prayer and action. However, from the point of view of *διακονία*, it is worth focusing on Martha and her service.

Before examining this passage, it must be remembered that the gospel stories were written to be read sequentially. Readers, or more likely listeners, in the early church built up a cumulative picture based on what had gone before in the gospel. Therefore, it is very important to realise that the parable immediately preceding this passage begins with Jesus’ teaching on loving God and loving neighbour. He then proceeds to widen the definition of neighbour through his recounting of the parable, which demonstrates the mercy and compassion of the Samaritan for the victim as he actively cares for him and (while the word is not used) demonstrates *διακονία* in action (10:25-37). Therefore, this pericope should be read in conjunction with the preceding parable as Jesus continues to teach about what it means to be a disciple.

As Jesus enters the village, two key verbs (*εἰσερχομαι* and *ὑποδέχομαι*) are used to show that he is welcomed with hospitality and that he accepts that hospitality. Martha is the model of that hospitality and of the *διακονία* that is involved. She is an independent woman, head of the house here and seems relatively prosperous as she hosts Jesus on his journey. When the narrator compares her with her sister, Mary, Martha is more prominent.

8 John N. Collins, “A Monocultural Usage: *Διακον*-words in Classical Hellenistic and Patristic Sources,” *JC* 66 (2012), 287-309: 301.

9 Gooder gives Collins’ example of the variety of service from Acts 6:1-4 where the seven men are chosen to organise the *διακονία*. While *διακονία* appears in both verses 2 and 4, verse 2 appears to be about waiting at table while verse 4 is about spreading the word. What is essential though is that both refer to the carrying out of a commissioned task. Paula Gooder, “Diakonia in the New Testament: A Dialogue with John N. Collins,” *Ecclesiology* 3 (2006): 33-56, 42.

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She is introduced first and far more information is given about her. Active verbs are used in contrast with the subordinate clause and passive verbs that introduce Mary. When they are first introduced, Martha is seen in a more favourable light as she seems to respect social convention, by serving, while Mary, by sitting at the Lord's feet, seems to put herself outside what is considered appropriate for women.¹⁰

However, as the story develops, certain ambiguities emerge with regard to Martha's service. The unusual verb (περισπάομαι) that is used to describe Martha's busyness with regard to her service can also mean agitation. So, is the fact that "Martha was distracted by her many tasks" (10:40)

- simply a neutral statement?
- Is the busyness understandable as she is showing hospitality and ministering as hostess in her home by entertaining an important guest who arrived unannounced?
- Is her διακονία very praiseworthy as she does it out of love or devotion for Jesus?
- On the other hand is the fact that the verb also means agitation implying that something is not right in her attitude?

Martha speaks to the Lord and reproaches him with an accusatory question. It is very self-centred as she begins by suggesting that he does not care about her and then uses personal pronouns to refer to herself and her difficulties three times (μου, με, μοι) and complains that she has been left to do the ministering or serving on her own (μόνος). "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?" (10:40). She describes Mary as "my sister"¹¹ and requests that Jesus tell "her" to help, thus ignoring Mary, who is beside her by Jesus' feet as she speaks to him. It is obvious too that Martha's address to Jesus is quite sharp and definitely not the language of hospitality. It takes the focus away from Jesus, her guest, and the hospitality and service that is his due.

The Lord's reply moves the spotlight to Martha's attitude rather than her complaint about Mary not helping and he chides her for being worried and agitated about many things. He is not criticising διακονία as this has been seen as a positive attribute of discipleship (4:39; 8:1-3), but he is criticising her attitude which is choking her ability to hear the word of God and put it into practice (8:14). Finally he rebukes Martha for her attitude to her sister and warns

10 Matteo Crimella, "Notes Philologiques À Propos de περισπάομαι en Luc 10,40. Entre Philologie et Narratologie," *RB* (2010): 120-125, 123.

11 Another example of this type of 'distancing' can be seen in 15:30 when the elder son berates his father for welcoming back his younger brother. Just as Martha does not personalize her sister by naming her, the elder brother describes his younger brother as "this son of yours."

her that Mary’s choice must be respected. Nothing is said about Martha’s reaction and readers are left wondering in the end about the outcome.

So the concept of *διακονία* is developed even more in the story of Martha and Mary. There have already been examples of table service and the providing of resources and support, but there is something more here. Martha’s service fits in perfectly with the concept of *διακονία*. She welcomes Jesus, invites him to her home and provides for him (and whoever is with him), but she fails to follow Mary’s example and listen to the Word of God that comes from Jesus. She is so caught up in worrying and being ‘hyper-busy’ that she misses out on really connecting with Jesus. To return to Collins’ broader definition of *διακονία*, she does not fully appreciate *who* is recommending this service and *why* it is demanded.

This is the *last time* that the term *διακονία* is used to refer to anyone other than Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. In 9:51, Luke says that “Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem.” As he sets out on this journey with his disciples, there are fewer miracles described and the focus is very much on Jesus and his disciples, as he teaches them about the Kingdom of God and how to be his disciples. The women have already imitated Jesus’ service in the first half of the Gospel. Now Jesus consolidates its importance by direct teaching and parables.

THE PARABLES REGARDING *διακονία* (12:35-38; 17:7-10)

In the *first* of these parables, the servants are ready and waiting when the master comes home and his reaction is to sit them down to a meal and serve them, thus reversing the normal roles of master and slave (12:35-38). In doing this, the Lord is showing the importance of *διακονία* and especially of servant leadership.

In the *second*, Jesus explains that when the slave comes in from the fields, he is still expected to serve his master before he eats and drinks himself. He points out that there is nothing unusual in this as it is what is expected of a slave (17:7-10). In a broader context, service is what is expected of the follower of Jesus.

On first reading, these parables seem to contradict one another but in fact they are two sides of the same coin. Everyone is called to serve and in serving, everyone is doing the work of the Lord. It is what is expected of followers of Jesus. On the other hand, Jesus models that service during his earthly ministry and calls his servants to do the same. Moreover, the Lord values those who serve and will reward them for that service.

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JESUS' TEACHING ON διακονία (22:26-27)

Immediately after the Last Supper, a high point in the Gospel (22:26-27), Jesus gives his crucial teaching about διακονία. He points out that he is among them as one who serves and therefore reveals himself as the servant leader. Having begun his ministry with healing service, he now concludes his ministry by setting this service as a standard for all of his followers, thus challenging them to imitate his example of servant leadership. Furthermore, by proclaiming and exemplifying this service, readers are left in no doubt as to what their response should be. "But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves."²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (22:26-27).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Service and servant leadership are fundamental teachings in Luke's Gospel and, alongside Jesus, it is women who epitomize this. Simon's mother-in-law foreshadows Jesus' διακονία by immediately getting up and serving in response to her healing. As the day progresses she collaborates with Jesus as he cures people of physical ailments and evil spirits. Both she and the Galilean women, follow Jesus' example by modelling mutual service in serving not only Jesus, but those who accompany him. While it is true that a number of men (for example, the men who bring the paralysed man to Jesus (5:18) and Levi who organizes a banquet for Jesus (5:29)) demonstrate διακονία, it is never actually named as such. However, it is the women in Luke's Gospel who exemplify the servant leadership that Jesus explicitly preaches in his farewell speech to his disciples after the Last Supper. The positioning of that speech implies that he delivers it as his last will and testament and, therefore, wants it to be taken very seriously by his followers.

To return to the discussions on synodality, one of the questions that is frequently asked is whether or not women should be allowed to become deacons. By considering Luke's Gospel and the obvious demonstration of διακονία by the women in that gospel, the answer would certainly be in the *affirmative*. Women foreshadow and demonstrate service to both Jesus and their community. They also work collaboratively with Jesus, the servant leader. The question regarding deaconate should not even arise as it has already been answered by their service/ διακονία in the Lukan Gospel.