

“MEETING TONIGHT” EXHIBITION – INTERPRETIVE HOMILY

Someone’s in the Kitchen with Martha:  
*Black Foodways as Sacred Practice*

MAURICE WALLACE

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”

—Luke 10:38-42 *ESV*

People...think because you’re always busy doing housework—every time they see you your hands are in a batch of dough, or there’s soot on your nose, or you smell like onions and garlic—you don’t have a mind. Well, I *do* have a mind; and I *do* pray and meditate. Not as much as I’d like, but more than some people think.

—Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible*

To hear Renita Weems tell it, Mary and Martha were day and night. Mary, she imagined, was a sensitive soul, amiable and generous of spirit. Martha, by contrast, was over-the-top, a control-freak given to dictatorial high handedness. For her part, Martha’s imperious ways seem like so much overcompensation for being made to feel insignificant, extraneous, perpetually overshadowed—in a word, *unseen*. What was her complaint against Mary, after all, but a passive-aggressive projection of an abruptly felt longing to be seen for a change, as her sister was seen, in the light of exemplary faith and womanly self-possession? What could have provoked Martha but an abrupt surge of feeling about the equal sacrality of the kitchen as a prayer closet and about her work there, most of it hidden from notice?

In preacher’s hands (typically male), Mary is usually the hero of this gospel drama, but woman-guided readers like Weems’s audience or those of Margaret Atwood who encountered “the Marthas” a few years earlier in *The Handmaid’s Tale* may prefer Martha as the more sympathetic and nobler figure. More powerfully than the “tired Lukan stereotype” of sentimental female piety many feminist theologians have come to begrudge<sup>1</sup>, the figure of Martha as cook and housekeeper models a history of women’s work few have known as intimately as Black women. Despite Luke’s spiritualizing of Mary’s aloofness and the privilege of quiet, solitary devotions few Black women have been afforded anywhere in the world—to say nothing of the Lord’s evident advocacy for Mary’s right to such devotionism, in any case—we might reimagine the “anxious and troubled” Martha, nevertheless, as fervent and dutiful in ministry. Could everyone have been so blind not to see in Martha’s very form and countenance how wholly pleasing, healing, and reverent her service seemed to her? How

liturgical her dance between oven and table appeared? How blissfully lost in the Spirit she got mincing, peeling, stirring, stirring, serving? Would that even the portrayed Lord had looked closer, as though through the lens of Holly Lynton's camera, and affirmed Martha, too. We have only to pause over a portrait or two by Lynton of Black women cooking to see for ourselves the holy in them, which I cannot resist picturing as fueling Martha's impatience for Mary's presence again among the kitchen women. Lynton's portrait of Ruth Simmons presiding, priest-like, over a camp stove exudes a poetic property in Ruth's practice that I fancy Martha's kitchen inspiring also.

Surely as reliable as Martha at her work, Ruth Simmons has been a mainstay of camp-meeting for as long as most campers can remember. Each year's memory of the week together in the woods is made the more vivid by the skill of Ruth's nourishing hand. Her hand excites the senses, especially smell and taste. It's not for nothing that she is one of the gathering's preferred cooks. *Ruth*, they say, *can burn!* But seen through Lynton's lens, Ruth is more than a camp cook; she has the look of a healer, too. No surprise. As quiet as its kept, Black folks have looked on food as medicine for a very long time. Ruth, it seems, is in this tradition.

Just look. Look closely at her. Lost in her labor, it's clear. With her great spoon she stirs and stirs. First one pot. Then another, as if the second envied her dotting upon the first. Lost to method and recipe as Albertina Walker sings soulful in her head, *Lord keep my body strong/ so that I may do no wrong/ Give me grace to run this Christian race/ to a building not made by hands.* Fried catfish crackles not too loud in accompaniment. Black care is being served here, and an unsung priesthood is seen by the incandescence of a single hanging bulb doing its level best to help her. A steward, a chaplain, a faith healer, and kitchen minister in one and the same body, this daughter of Martha, routinely misrecognized and relegated to the ranks of "the help" in white minds, is hardly exceptional, though. She is one of legions more like her. Black women food artists and kitchen brokers. "These mothers, grandmothers, daughters, nieces, and friends [who] carried their individual and collective power through care and feeding," as my friend Psyche Williams-Forsen wrote recently.<sup>2</sup>

I often think of them, holding their traumas as they cooked stockfish and beef or used flour to make bread, like the cook at George Washington's Mount Vernon who used to rise at 4:00 a.m. to get the food started for the day... These Black women showed us how to speak love through food long before Jill Scott told us, "It's Love" and asked, "Do you want it on your collard greens? Do you want it on your candy sweets?" Pickled beets? Rice and gravy? Biscuits or black-eyed peas?<sup>3</sup>

*Holding their traumas* even as they marshal fried okra and hot water cornbread to heal the grief of a people's racial travails and losses, salving wound that have no words to point to. Still, this ministry—the Order of the Daughters of Martha, let's call it—is not only griefwork. For the depths of these women's knowing of suffering are equaled by the heights of their fealty to joy. Joy that ministers life to sickness and vigor to mourning, that raises the dead to bright memory and answers back to the storm with giddiness and laughter like speechless survivors incredulous that they did not die by its fury.

Thusly empowered, cooking Black women, not just devotees of sacred practice but practical theologians in their own right, were before even Bonhoeffer in fashioning a theology of the table. Before Bonhoeffer wrote that "God cannot endure that unfeasting, mirthless attitude of ours in which we eat our bread in sorrow, with pretentious, busy haste, or even with shame," Black women's foodways were satisfying that same joyful imperative in Black households (and more often than they cared to, white ones alike), in late-night jooks and AME fellowship halls. Perhaps theirs were the suppers that tutored Bonhoeffer in Harlem the year of his study in the US and gave his

ideas about Christian community complexion. Is it so far-flung to wonder if Black table life in Harlem in 1930-31, the early years of a decade's depression, did not reveal itself to the German pastor with such eucharistic resonance as to inspire whole lines of *Life Together* nine years on? Surely the material conditions of life in Harlem then *required* an ethical orientation to food there that one hears in Bonhoeffer's theological writing:

The table fellowship of Christians implies obligation. It is *our* daily bread that we eat... We share our bread. Thus, we are firmly bound to one another not only in the Spirit but in our whole physical being. The *one* bread that is given to our fellowship links us together in a firm covenant. Now none dares go hungry as long as another has bread, and he who breaks this fellowship of the physical life also breaks the fellowship of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup>

It is the same Spirit today prevailing at camp-meeting as the One who spoke years and years ago under Bonhoeffer's name.

"No visitor to a camp meeting will ever leave hungry," our photographer said lately, musing about the meaning of food in the experience of faith. She was giving personal voice to the wonder of food and religious feeling she captured at Shady Grove and St. Paul. Personal as it was, though, her statement doesn't fail to make a public declaration about the inestimable treasure we have Black in foodways and the wonder-working power of Black women like Ruth to serve up life with their bare hands.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Christy Cobb and Bailey Freeman, "Be a Martha!: Marthas in Luke, John, and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *FSR: Feminist Studies in Religion* (blog), June 7, 2019, <https://www.fsrinc.org/be-a-martha-marthas-in-luke-john-and-atwoods-the-handmaids-tale/>.

<sup>2</sup> Psycho Williams-Forson, "Black Women, Food & Power," in ed. Bryant Terry, *Black Food: Stories, Art & Recipes from Across the African Diaspora* (California: 4 Color Books, 2021), 173.

<sup>3</sup> Williams-Forson, 173, 174.

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 68.