

Healing the Tension of Opposites Another Look at Mary and Martha

Good morning.

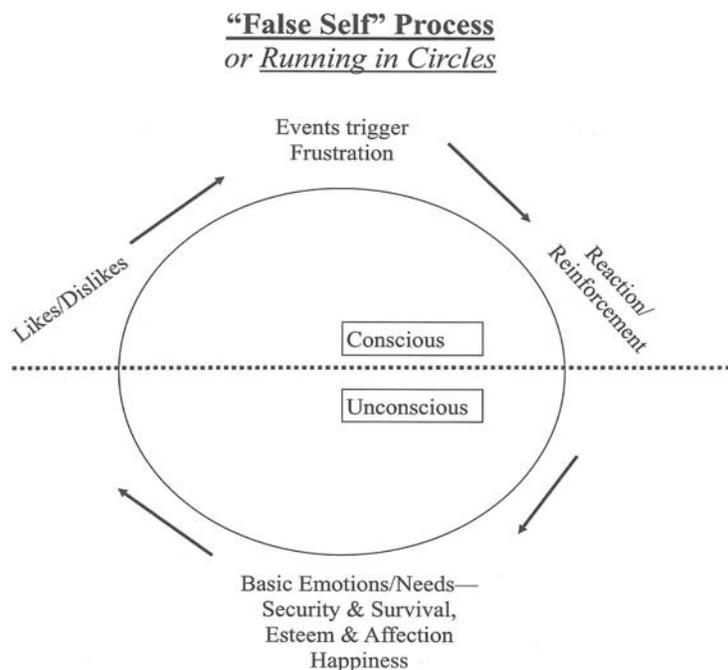
This story of Mary and Martha is very familiar to most of us. However when I first read it in preparation for this morning's talk, I noticed that things were different for me. I felt softer towards the characters. I was looking more gently at them, and more gently at myself as I considered what this story means to me. For one thing, Jesus was different. He moved. He moved from standing between Mary and Martha, approving of one and reproofing the other, to standing with Martha, offering her friendship and help. Why—or rather, how—did this change come about, I wondered. Access, is my answer. Through spiritual practices such as the *lectio divina* we did this morning, I have given God some access and God has changed me. The primary thing God is changing in me is the thing God is always trying to change in us. God wants to change our understanding of who God is, and consequently, who we are. God wants access so God can change our mind about what we think God thinks of us, and how God feels about us. This is a reflection on my “*lectio divina*” experience with this passage. I hope I can adequately convey how using spiritual practices helps us move toward God.

“Mary” and “Martha” have become a kind of shorthand for us. A Martha is someone who is overly busy, always doing, a little self righteous, a little fretful. A Mary is someone more contemplative, who finds time to be quiet and to be devoted to God, perhaps a little “other worldly.” I can swing back and forth between feeling irritated with Martha for being self righteous and crabby, to feeling defensive and protective of her, wanting to shield her from criticism. I understand the resentment that comes when you feel you are doing all the work, pulling most of the load; when it seems no one else is helping or cares as much as you do. Sometimes that is the very definition of our experience of being in the workplace; or of church committee work; or of family life. I can feel irritated with Mary, too, for being so perfect and making Martha look bad. This time, however, in looking at Martha and Mary a little more gently, I realized that they are not types of people, as much as they are parts of me. I find the story more interesting and instructive when I let it come inside me and invite me to embrace all

that is going on, even the parts that trouble or repel me. Instead of contrasting Mary and Martha as persons, and who is right and who is wrong, I am interested in the healing that comes with embracing the parts of me they represent. Mary shows us what attentiveness looks like, but Martha shows us “how” to move from frustration to relief. She offers us the most help and the most hope for what ails us.

In the story Jesus stops off on his way to Jerusalem at the home of his friends, the sisters Mary and Martha. Martha, the passage says, welcomes Jesus. But then she is distracted by her many tasks, and comes to Jesus, distressed. First she rebukes him, saying something like, “Don’t you care that I’m being unfairly treated here. Do something about it—scold Mary and make her help.” Mary, by contrast, is sitting at Jesus’ feet, listening. We know from years of hearing this story that we are to be like Mary. Maybe because in the story Jesus says Mary chose the better way, we frame this episode as a competition. Someone is right and someone is wrong. Someone gets Jesus’ approval and someone doesn’t. Someone is religious or spiritual, and someone is caught up in worldly things. We have a winner and a loser. Be like Mary, we are told

I’m wondering if we wouldn’t do well to also be like Martha.



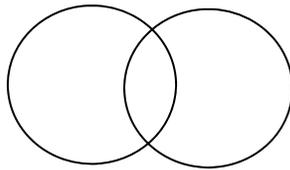
This picture is a simplified version of “The False Self in Action” diagram found in Cynthia Bourgeault’s book, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*. It will be familiar to those of you who were in the Centering Prayer Sunday School class, or are reading her book. We’re going to use it to see if we can better understand what is happening to Martha in the story, and thereby better understand what happens to us when we experience “frustration.”

This diagram, renamed for our purposes “The False Self Process—Running in Circles”, shows the program we have all learned to run to try to get our basic needs met to feel safe, valued, and to have some degree of control over our lives. We think we behave freely, but according to this diagram, we are driven by forces out of our awareness. The hope is that by bringing all of this to our conscious awareness, and with practice, we can be truly free. As followers of Jesus Christ, we want to be free to love and affect peace in the world. We want to be responsive rather than reactive.

In our unconscious are the basic needs: security and survival; esteem and affection; and power and control. They manifest themselves in our consciousness as attachments and aversions-- things we like and things we don’t like. We want to have more pleasurable experiences and avoid experiences that are troubling or painful. Since we will inevitably collide at times with others people running their programs, we are bound to experience frustration. We react with anger, resentment, fear, etc. initiating our internal commentary which reinforces the story we have programmed to meet the trials of life. The ensuing emotional turmoil travels back down into the unconscious and serves to reinforce the programs, making them more likely to run again.

Let’s see what happens when we apply this process to Martha’s story. Martha is running at least one of these programs because she is human—even if only a character in a story. Let’s say she has power and control needs driving her. They manifest as an image Martha has of herself as a good hostess, the belief that she keeps a good house, takes care of guests, and keeps everything running smoothly. Her hidden agenda may be to keep everything under control so she doesn’t

feel chaos, and so others think well of her—she is also running a bit of an esteem program. She wants to be good, to be seen as good, and her criteria for that is an orderly house and well-cared for guests. Frustration comes when she can't manage everything. Her wellbeing is threatened. She feels worried, out of sorts, and resentful. She looks around to find the cause of her discomfort, and lands on Mary. I'm guessing most of us don't have any trouble imagining her internal commentary: "Mary is leaving me with all of the tasks; she isn't helping, isn't doing her part. Mary is so thoughtless, and a little lazy. I'd like to sit down with Jesus too, who wouldn't, but then nothing would get done."



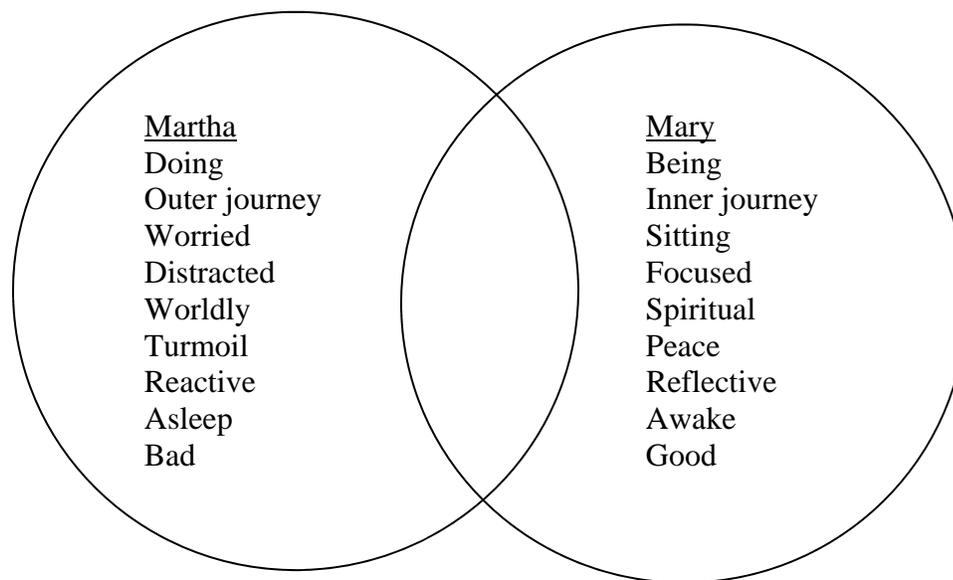
This figure is a mandorla, and we're going to use it help us understand that each of us is both Mary and Martha. "Mandorla" is the Italian word for "almond," and it refers to the figure formed by the overlap area. This was a popular image in medieval art, often with a picture of the Virgin or of Christ in the center. The figure represents the re-uniting of heaven and earth. Heaven and earth are a whole, but we see them as parts, opposites even. Jesus, the central figure of our faith, is a mandorla. He depicts the unity of the human and the divine, not as two separate things, but one whole. You'll notice the Christian symbol of the fish formed in the overlap.

Jungian psychologist and Christian author Robert Johnson writes about the mandorla in his book, *Owning Your Own Shadow*. According to Johnson, we are all born whole and the work of our lives is to die whole. Somewhere early on, as we learn that some things are acceptable and some things are not acceptable, we begin to separate things into good and bad. We put away the bad things, burying them deep in our personality or denying them or just becoming unaware that they are there at all. But they are there, because they are part of the whole and they belong. It is an arbitrary sorting, with some things being acceptable in one culture, but unacceptable in others—like belching. In some cultures it is a compliment and in others it is rude. Regardless of the particulars, we all learn the game.

All good stories are mandorlas, showing us how to heal the divisions and contradictions in our lives. The story of Mary and Martha is a good story. It is a mandorla. Like Martha we all want to project our hidden selves onto others, to make Mary the problem rather than owning the problem. The mandorla can help us reclaim all the parts of ourselves.

Let's sort out the parts of this story using the mandorla to show the contrasts that are in tension in this story. In one circle we have Martha and in the other Mary.

(These are not perfect or exhaustive lists.)



Mary and Martha live in each of us; they are parts of us. If we are to be whole, we must make peace with both of them. Healing comes when we can acknowledge and value both of them. If we only acknowledge our Mary, we leave our Martha frustrated, doomed to run her “False Self in Action” loop. If we only acknowledge our Martha, we miss that within each of us is a Mary attuned to God and already listening. One isn't good and the other bad. One isn't loved and the other despised. One isn't valuable and the other worthless. Both are necessary. Both are needed for wholeness. Both belong.

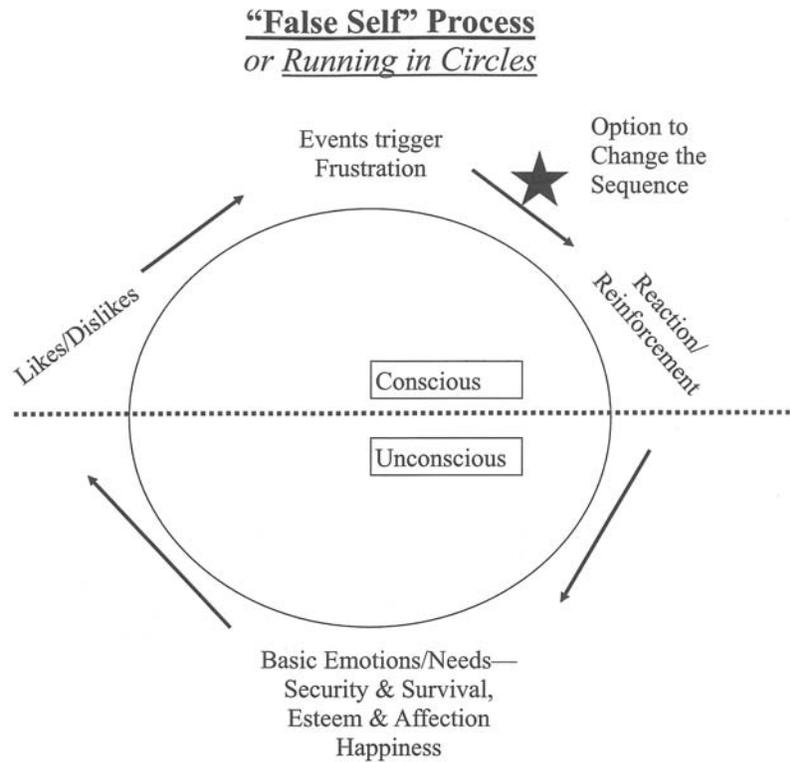
What role does Jesus play in the story? He says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. Mary has chosen the better way and it will not be taken from her.” Jesus is friend to both Mary and Martha. He declines the invitation to diminish Mary to make Martha feel better. Such a fix is shallow and it seldom satisfies. He wants more for Martha.

He says her name, twice. I used to think it was scolding. I now think he was receiving her, welcoming her, drawing her into his embrace. He tells her the truth. He names her real problem—you are worried and distracted by many things. Fixing Mary won’t help because Mary isn’t the problem. We don’t know for sure what Martha was feeling or what she did next. But I do know the Martha in me, the one who is trying to hold everything together and who gets overwhelmed and then blames others for not doing something to help me, for not doing more, for not appreciating all that I am doing. I am grateful for Martha’s faith and for her example for when this very familiar kind of thing happens to us. She goes to Jesus and complains. And he does what Jesus is supposed to do, he helps her by not leaving her stuck with her false self running the circle.

He doesn’t tell either of them what to do. He doesn’t tell Martha to be like Mary. Martha doesn’t need to do better; the last thing a person striving to be perfect needs is “to do better.” She needs help getting out of her reactive false self. She needs healing. The way out of this loop for Martha is through seeing her own life, not finding fault with Mary. Healing for Martha isn’t to be more like Mary, but to be free to be Martha. Resentment and self-righteousness are binding up experiences, not freeing ones.

Martha doesn’t keep her commentary to herself, but brings it to Jesus. Her willingness to show herself to Jesus is what allows Jesus to step into her loop and interrupt the running of the program. Martha may be grumpy, but I think she is also the picture of faith. She knows Jesus and she trusts him enough to show him her stuff, even if we, a couple of centuries later, judge

her to be self righteous and crabby. She knows where to go for help. She gives Jesus access. That is the very picture of trust, and Martha trusted Jesus.



Theologian Richard Foster says that the spiritual disciplines don't change us, but they put us in position to be changed by God. They help us give God access to us. In our False Self Process diagram, there is a place where we can interrupt the cycle, right after the frustration, at the star in the diagram. Martha did it by taking her complaint to Jesus. She could have just stayed in the kitchen stewing. She had Jesus there in the flesh to help. We also need to find a way.

About four years ago in a study program, I learned the following prayer, called The Welcoming Prayer. I started praying this welcoming prayer at times when I felt distressed. It seemed to help me gather in all the parts and not push shadowy things away, and not judge things as bad and good, but simply notice what is. As I prayed the “letting go” parts, it was like gently exposing those programs of the false self that take me down the reactive path. And the prayer reminded me to open to God and to myself. Here it is.

The Welcoming Prayer

by Mary Mrozowski

Welcome, welcome, welcome.

I welcome everything that comes to me in this moment
because I know it is for my healing.

I welcome all thoughts,
feelings, emotions, persons,
situations and conditions.

I let go of my desire for security.

I let go of my desire for approval.

I let go of my desire for control.

I let go of my desire to change any situation, condition, person or myself.

I open to the love and presence of God
and the healing action and grace within.

The story of Martha and Mary, for me, is no longer about deciding who is good and who is caught being bad. And it isn't about the activity, it's about distraction and attention and how to move from the one to the other. Reuniting my inner Mary—attentive and listening—and my inner Martha—worried and distracted—lets me function as a whole, not having to deny one or the other of them. I believe Jesus when he says he came to set us free to love and to be peacemakers, neither of which we can do when we are simply reactive. We talk about it a lot in religion, but sometimes have no idea how to appropriate it in our lives. It has been a tremendous relief to discover—more accurately, to have been given—the spiritual practices, such as *lectio divina*, the mandorla, and the welcoming prayer. They are gifts from a gracious God who is ever drawing us into healing and wholeness. Amen.