

Proper 11C 2019 Sermon

July 21, 2019

Luke 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Note: Much of what I share with you today is taken verbatim from the writing of Fr. John Shea,¹ whose perspective on today's Gospel story I have heard or read nowhere else, but which rings very true to me.

Today's Gospel reading immediately follows last week's Gospel, wherein Jesus encountered a lawyer who wanted to know what to *do* to inherit eternal life. The lawyer could *recite* the double-commandment to love God and neighbor, but he was not putting it into practice in his life. Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan, wherein a man traveling along a road is ambushed, robbed, beaten and left half-dead. Both a Jewish priest and a Levite *see* the half-dead man and pass him by. If they have a deep inner connection with God, they are not acting from that inner space. But a Samaritan sees the man and he *acts from* that inner connection with God, which motivates and energizes his outward acts of compassion, loving his neighbor.

In today's Gospel, Martha is outwardly **doing** many things, but she is doing them *without* the "one thing necessary" – without a deep, inner connection with God, the source of all good. Jesus confronts Martha and points out clearly that she must reassess the situation. *Mary* should not join **her**: *she* should join **Mary**. In the story, Mary **embodies** and symbolizes the one thing necessary: that deep, inner connection with God from which flows truly loving, compassionate, and effective action in the world.

Storyteller and priest John Shea notes that in spiritual teaching, the image of 'sisters' symbolizes side-by-side realities that are *meant* to be **together**. *Separating* them diminishes both. Therefore, although Christian history is fond of playing Martha and Mary *against* one another, the **real** task is to discover their proper relationship, their true sisterhood. It is not a matter of which one is more important; it is a matter of how they complement each other. The teaching of today's Gospel story is about discovering their mutuality.

Two chapters earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus had told the parable of the sower, the seed, and the different types of soil. In *explaining* that parable to his disciples, Jesus said: "As for [the seed that] fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares... of life, and their fruit does not mature. [That *seems* to be the danger for Martha in today's Gospel – being choked by the cares of life.] But as for the seeds that fall in the good soil," Jesus continues, "these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance." (Luke 8:14-15) With the seed that falls in good soil, there is an inner activity (holding the word fast in an honest and good heart) which, with steady perseverance, overflows into an outer activity (bearing fruit). In today's Gospel story, Mary is a representative of the *inner* activity, while Martha is a representative of *outer* activity that has somehow become disengaged from its inner grounding and has become scattered in multiple outward tasks. She has become separated from, and at odds with, her sister. She speaks in a resentful tone and voices a complaint that resonates with many of us who find ourselves frantic in our many outward activities. From Martha's perspective, the problem is simply sized up. She is frantic and distracted because there are too many tasks. Her problem, she thinks, is the amount of work she has to do.

Her mindset is universal. So many of us, myself included, live with an underlying sense of there being too much to do and too little time to do it; and it makes us frantic. Martha has a *solution* to her problem. The obvious *reason* she is overwhelmed is that her sister has left her to do all the work by herself. If Mary would join her, "many hands make light work."

Now, this makes immense common sense, and throughout Christian history Martha's observation has been vigorously defended as a legitimate complaint. So she asks the Lord to *tell* Mary to **help** her. Of course, this means Jesus should do **Martha's** bidding and tell Mary to help Martha *on Martha's terms*—abandoning Mary's inner activity of receiving and meditating on the teachings of the Lord and joining the outer world of multiple tasks. Martha's strategy is to make the two sisters one, turning Mary into a clone of Martha. She wants to collapse the two-tiered, integrated world of Mary-Martha into the **one**-dimensional world of **Martha-Martha**.

Jesus says to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

The Lord sees things differently. Martha's problem is not that she has a lot to do and no one to help her. This is a skewed perception of the complementary wholeness of Mary-Martha, contemplation **and** action, together. Martha's real problem is her **inner state** of worry and distraction. This frantic inner state *undercuts* her actions and makes them less effective, not "good," not grounded in

God. But this inner state of worry is not *caused* by the multitude of tasks, as Martha thinks. Fewer tasks will not make her less discombobulated.

Her anxious and scattered consciousness is the result of **ungrounded** activity. Martha has engaged the **many** without being *rooted* in the **one** thing necessary. Although most English Bibles translate this “one thing” as the “*better* part,” the actual word in the Greek text isn’t “better,” but “good.” Mary has chosen the “good” part. The “good” part is the **connection** to God who **is** good (Mark 10:18), who is the ground and energy of all *spiritually-empowered, effective* action. Martha should not try to take this away from Mary and drag **her** into the *outer* world where Martha already flounders. The solution is not for Mary to become Martha or for Martha to become Mary. The spiritual project is to relate them to one another for the benefit of both. After all, they are sisters.

Dr. Otto Scharmer is Sr. Lecturer at MIT and an expert in the field of Organization Development. He has worked with governments in Africa, Asia, and Europe, and with global corporations such as Daimler-Chrysler, Price Waterhouse, and Google. In his research at MIT and in his working with governments and corporations to bring about positive change, Scharmer has come to this conclusion (and these are his words): “The success of our actions... does not depend on *what* we do or *how* we do it, but on *the inner place from which we operate*... It means opening the mind, the heart, and the will. It means suspending old habits of judgment. It means empathizing. And it means letting go of what wants to die in oneself and letting come what is waiting to be born.”² (unquote)

Some 2000 years after Jesus, modern Organization Development researchers are discovering the lesson Jesus taught Martha: that individuals, governments, and corporations will **always** be frantic and worried and ineffective if they are not operating out of that inner place of compassion and openness of mind, heart, and will which we Christians would call the “indwelling Spirit” or the “inner Christ.”

My friends, if you are at all like me, you likely find that your life resembles Martha much more than it resembles Mary. For we live in a “Martha, Martha” society of unceasing outward activity and frustration and argument, often emanating from a worried, distracted consciousness disconnected from the inner Christ who lives at the center of our soul, often unnoticed. We tend to float on the surface of a roiling sea, unmoored, susceptible to being tossed about by whatever comes at us from our outer world and distracts us, grabs our attention, and makes us believe that it is those **outer** things that are *really* what is important. We avoid the “one thing necessary,” which is our soul’s deep, inner connection with God, which requires our constant, intentional nurturing through such spiritual practices as meditation and contemplative prayer, such as Centering Prayer. And it is that connection with God and God’s animating Spirit that enables, directs, and empowers “good” action. As Otto Scharmer discovered, “The success of our actions... does not depend on *what* we do or *how* we do it, but on *the inner place*

*from which we operate...*²

This story of Mary and Martha is *our* story! And it is important that we remember that it is not a story of Mary being favored over Martha. Mary and Martha are not to be *compared* but **united** into a Mary-Martha whole, not one winning the other over so that there is Mary-Mary or Martha-Martha. Non-dualistic consciousness, to which Jesus calls us, does not separate the inner from the outer, or drive a wedge between body and soul.

Christian tradition has often spoken of this inner and outer integrity as “contemplation in action.” It is why Richard Rohr called his center in Albuquerque, “The Center for Action and Contemplation.” God is **both** inside *and* outside, a power that sustains our personal being **and** a summons that calls us to cooperate in building a just, compassionate world. When we wake up to this revelation that all things exist and are suffused by divine life, we simultaneously wake up to our identity as Mary-Martha: grounded in God in our *inner* spirit, which leads to effective, God-shaped action in our *outer* lives.

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *The Relentless Widow: Luke, Year C*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 201-206

² Otto Scharmer: *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013