

The **MAST** *Journal*

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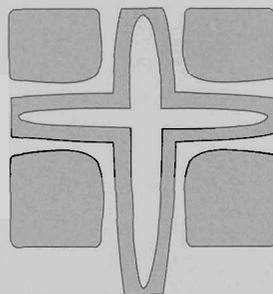
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Martha and Mary

Integrating or Disintegrating Images for Action and Contemplation

Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.

Symbols and images in our Christian tradition tend to reside uncritically in our imaginations with entire trains of associations, feelings, and meanings attached to them. These meanings and interpretations often have specific historical, social contexts which shaped them, but which may have become obscured over time. These symbols then take on a life of their own, especially when they are embedded in Scripture and reinforced by preaching, art, and popular culture. We continue to be influenced helpfully or destructively by various aspects of this received tradition unless we critically reflect on their potential to continue to maintain oppression or to support liberating, healthy spiritual growth in us.

It seems to me that part of our contemporary difficulty in integrating contemplation and action in our lives as women,

religious or lay, has something to do with our failure to criticize the images which maintain this dichotomy and to creatively imagine this integration in images or stories which might foster and support such wholeness. Our received images sometimes serve to reinforce the dichotomy because of our failure to notice other interests at work in the images or in their uses in the spiritual tradition.

Schüssler Fiorenza's Four-Stage Model

Within feminist biblical interpretation, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has developed a four-fold strategy for reading received biblical texts: They are ideological suspicion, historical reconstruction, theoethical assessment, and creative imagination. Basically, these four strategies help develop feminist critical

consciousness. A hermeneutics of suspicion "seeks to detect and analyze not only the androcentric presuppositions and patriarchal interests of the text's contemporary interpretations and historical reception, but also those of biblical texts themselves."¹ This strategy assumes that all biblical texts are embedded in a patriarchal culture, religion, and society, and have typically been interpreted by men.

The second reading strategy, historical reconstruction that she has elsewhere² called a hermeneutics of remembrance, seeks to discover remnants and historical information which supports a retrieval of women's actual history and roles in early Christianity which was subsequently obscured in the androcentric biases and interests in the received texts. This strategy restores a history to women in the early church.

The third reading strategy, a hermeneutics of proclamation, "ethically evaluates and theologically assesses" how a biblical text either contributes to maintaining oppression against women or how it might foster female empowerment and women's struggle for liberation. This assessment takes into consideration the present audience of women and the effect a given text might have

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on her within her own context. When and for whom might this text provide nourishing food? For instance, encouraging a woman to love another as Christ has loved us when the woman is in an abusive situation could serve to maintain her continued abuse and the patriarchal assumptions of such a marriage which maintains male dominance and female subservience.

Finally, the fourth strategy, a hermeneutics of liberating imagination rewrites or reenvisions the story in a way that supports women's empowerment and struggle for justice in church and society.

These basic reading strategies may be fruitfully employed in reading historical texts from the spiritual tradition as well as biblical texts. These strategies point to fruitful processes of reflection and entirely new interpretations of traditional stories and long-maintained impasses in women's spiritual lives. I have also been struck how often women's contemplative experience enables them to do such creative reimagination and even claim authority on the basis of recognizing liberating possibility through their visionary experience which finds a way through impasses which serve to maintain women's subordination.

Martha-Mary Dichotomies

I propose to explore this theme of our inherited dichotomy between contemplation and action by something of a meditation on the figures of Martha and Mary. This is not a piece of technical exegesis, although I have been

influenced by various feminist readings of this story over the last twenty years³ of feminist interpretations of Luke 10:38–42. I am more simply reflecting on and playing with the images of this story as they may have affected us negatively or positively as women reading and praying with this story and expanding the range of possible interpretations by drawing on some of these principles of feminist biblical interpretation, extrabiblical legends, and a less well-known medieval tradition which favored Martha.⁴

that Jesus himself had to rein her in. Yet many women do identify with her in a way which creates and maintains internal conflicts within themselves as well as diminishes the importance or significance of women's work or activity in any sphere. At the very least, Martha's treatment appears to be unfair regardless of any actual defects in her personality or complaints. Mary wins the praise prize and there is no second prize for Martha.

Few women necessarily entirely identify with Mary, passively sitting at Jesus' feet. After

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The scriptural parable of Martha and Mary has long symbolized seemingly irreconcilable aspects of our lives as women. If interpreted as mutually exclusive feminine archetypes, Martha gradually came to symbolize the woman who works too much, either at home or in public life and Mary the serenely, passive and conflict-free woman of contemplation. In patriarchal interpretations of the story, no woman in her right mind (the one tamed to conformity) wants to identify with Martha, who often appears so busy, even bossy,

all, do you know any women, cloistered contemplatives included, who actually do only that? Luke's parable seems to give us a caricature of each woman. When the parable stands alone separated from its larger context, we are often troubled by the friction even competition between the two sisters. Not only is Mary somehow the better disciple; but also once Jesus, as the male guest and authority figure affirms her choice, it is nearly impossible to restore mutuality between the sisters or to restore esteem for Martha.

Friends of Jesus and Ecclesial Leaders

Even more disturbing, these two sisters, who in John's gospel, a completely different story world and ecclesial context than that of Luke's parable, were among Jesus' dearest friends. Their home was his place of welcome, hospitality, and refuge. Both women were recognized as leaders in the Johannine community. Both become positive models of female disciples. Martha speaks resurrection faith in the face of her brother's death equivalent to the petrine christological confession in the synoptics. Mary is the disciple her anoints Jesus for burial, the positive example of discipleship in contrast to Judas.

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Why is it that Luke's version "stuck" in our imaginations, creating this forced choice between the two sisters and what they came to symbolize? Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion suggests in her reading of this same passage that the story itself is used by Luke to mute the role of women like Martha in the early Christian community. Martha's treatment by Jesus represents not Jesus' actual

behavior or attitudes but that of an increasingly androcentric church which is prescribing Mary's role, passive listener, as the preferred role of women in the community. Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that as women identify with Martha they internalize the conflict that is in the text itself, intentionally fulfilling patriarchal desires that Christian women relinquish leadership within the community.

The strategy of remembrance and reconstruction discovers that Luke and Acts has eliminated women in the ministry of word and table (*diakonia*) which survive in the Pauline Epistles and the Johannine community. Here, she notes that the

text enscribes current conflicts within the church of Luke's day rather than the experience of the first disciples gathered around Jesus. This text and its women-restricting interpretation served patriarchal purposes by restricting active women and prescribing passivity and continues to do so today unless they are critically noticed. This parable has stuck in our imaginations because centuries of preaching and

interpretation have maintained its women-restricting intentions up to the present time.

Was it Actually a Harmonious Relationship?

Yet perhaps, the sisters themselves had a better relationship with one another than the Lucan parable suggests. Perhaps, we can retrieve these sisters as an integrating symbol through the play of imagination as Fiorenza encourages us to do.

Most women today have grown accustomed to feeling fragmented or simply pulled in multiple directions at once. There is a psychological truth to the parable which still holds true. The story of these two sisters and centuries of commentary on it only too accurately epitomize the split between work (both unpaid work at home and all forms of public life) and spirituality. Commonly, the split might also apply to that between work and prayer, action and contemplation, housework and leisure. There is much for reflection!

As you remember, Martha welcomes Jesus into her home while "Mary sits at the Lord's feet." In the meantime, Martha involves herself in the tasks of hospitality. Eventually, Martha approaches Jesus with the request: "Rabbi, tell her to help me . . ." and he replies, "Martha, Martha, you are burdened about many things. Mary has chosen the good portion and it shall not be taken from her." (Luke 10:41-2)

How we, women, have struggled with this story! Its common interpretation sets the two sisters against one another—maybe

even competing for the attention of the most important male in the entourage. We want to be like Mary, apparently free from mundane or domestic tasks to listen to Jesus, enjoy his presence, sit down for a change—yet we find ourselves serving and serving, caught up with our work even while we yearn for contemplative repose or the enjoyment of more mutual relationships.

Typically, interpretations of the story have used Mary as a symbol of the contemplative life and Martha of the active life, identified with being too busy about mundane domestic tasks. Even in our own feminine imaginations, we see her as too concerned with the details of preparing dinner to enjoy her guests. Something about her rings true in terms of someone who serves from a need to be needed, or someone who is compulsively busy. If these are dispositions with which we struggle, the story challenges this. But it can do so only if we are free to identify equally with either woman. So long as one is good and the other not; one role ours and the other not, the story ceases to invite us to integration.

But is this work/prayer split the whole story? Could it be that Martha as a type began accumulating negatively charged, gendered reactions to a woman who is somehow stepping outside of her place? Might she be a competent, active leader whose influence must be constrained in order to keep her and women like her in their places, restricted to the domestic sphere, which is not all that important anyway? Haven't we often felt such

gendered reactions in our own active ministerial lives? Ought we not be a little bit suspicious of this line of interpretation which most of us have unconsciously assimilated?

Location of Martha-Mary in Luke's Narrative

Placing the story in its wider context opens further lines of interpretation. It occurs in a pivotal section of Luke's gospel—the

hospitality, a key feature of the kingdom of God. When the parable is detached from the larger narrative, the force of Martha's positive activity of "welcoming" and hospitality becomes obscured. Jesus and the disciples have arrived at Jerusalem, Bethany marking the outskirts of this destination.

The episodes sandwiched in between these two stories are the sending out of the seventy-two disciples, the instructions for missionary life, and the story of the

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first missionary journey. At the beginning of the literary unit, the Samaritans refuse hospitality to Jesus and his disciples because they are on their way to Jerusalem, and in so doing the Samaritans reject the gospel (Luke 9:51–56). They are notoriously inhospitable. A general principle in biblical interpretation looks for a chiastic structure to illumine meaning and themes within a literary unit.⁵ The structure of this section does not disappoint us because it ends with Martha's active hospitality, welcoming Jesus and his band of disciples into her home. Symbolically, she embraces the gospel through her activity of

Good Samaritan. Jesus' prayer of praise to his Abba, expressing gratitude for the wonderful works of grace done through the evangelizing disciples, is the center of the section. In a chiastic structure, the center is the main point. In this section, it is this praise to God for activity in the world through the disciples.

At this central point in the story, the disciples meet the lawyer whose question about eternal life leads to the "answer" in the Good Samaritan parable. (Luke 10:25–37) This parable ends with the admonition, "Go and do the same," namely, to treat one's enemies as a neighbor with compassion.

Is the Focus Inclusion of Mary in Full Discipleship?

The next stop on their itinerary is Martha's house. Martha appears to model this inclusivity of care intuitively in her hospitality without benefit of Jesus' explicit instruction about how she is to act. She generously welcomes Jesus and the disciples into her home. She exemplifies the ideal disciple—universal hospitality being one of the marks of discipleship along with compassion. At the same time, Martha speaks her mind, apparently burdened by the details of hospitality. I wonder how the "Good Samaritan" felt as his journey was interrupted by the man left for dead by the roadside. His story world gives him no one to whom to complain or to confide in even if he felt like it.

Jesus does not praise the priest and Levite who led the scholarly, contemplative life of the day available to men in his culture. Instead, he advocates an inclusive care and compassion for everyone, men and women, Jews and Greeks, Samaritans and . . . Is Jesus' remark about Mary, his defense of her call to full discipleship and apostolic life? Could this be a form of inclusive hospitality on Jesus' part and not a commentary about Martha at all?

This text has been used to defend Mary's obliviousness to necessary household tasks. She is often admired as a symbol of the idealized contemplative—off somewhere in prayer. This interpretation developed by connecting this story with the chapter on prayer which follows rather than

looking at the larger narrative unit to which the story is a conclusion and resolution of the dilemma posed by inhospitality.

Martha and Mary Exemplify Discipleship

The story itself suggests something more startling. Mary is welcome to participate in the disciple group and seemingly is excused from "women's work." She is admitted to the public role of *disciple* with the others who were traveling with Jesus. "To sit at a Rabbi's feet" meant to apprentice oneself as a disciple—to study Torah with the rabbi, the teacher. Recent feminist interpretation of this section points out that Mary is welcome to listen but not to question and speak as even the twelve-year-old Jesus does in Luke 2:46.⁶ It suggests that this split between the sisters is not relational, but a strategy which first splits the two ministries of preaching and table service (*diakonia*) which were a single unity and then subordinates one to the other and until women's participation in either disappears altogether from the text and historical memory.

If we resist this splitting, both women, in different ways, can be seen to be exemplary models of discipleship. Both assume roles that are usually performed by men. In Middle Eastern culture, the head of the household is the one who offers hospitality to the guest or stranger. (Remember Abraham entertaining the three angelic visitors, while Sarah eavesdrops from behind the tent?) In this instance, we must assume that Martha is the head of the house-

hold. When she appears in John's gospel and speaks resurrection faith, it is clear that she is the head of the house church and in charge of the funeral services. Mary studies at the feet of her teacher and Jesus defends her right to participate in that form of theological education. Androcentric interpretations of the text, ones which maintain women's social status relative to the male to whom they are attached, prefers to lock her safely away in a cloister or banish her to the desert where she would be no threat to her codisciples.

Both women, we find, are focused in different ways on single-hearted devotion to the Christ. Jesus is the center of attention of Martha's hospitality and the center of Mary's as *disciple*, one who is being taught. In the Gospels, women are *called* and follow Christ through the symbols of their working world. Men leave boats and nets; women leave water jars. Men are called at work fishing or collecting taxes; women are called while drawing water or cooking. All are focused on Jesus and the way of life he lived and taught. Both leave behind something symbolic of their ordinary lives.

This parable of the two women exemplifies two equally appropriate responses to Jesus and the reigning of God. The first is welcome, hospitality, and community leadership. The second is receptivity to receiving the word, the teaching, and the one who teaches, the Rabbi. We presume both will continue to share in the life of full apostolic discipleship in which each one teaches, evangelizes, and converts others.

Were we to welcome these expansions of meaning Martha and Mary might represent for us, once we see through their androcentric intentions, we would be well on our way to healing the false dichotomies set up by the story and reinforced by subsequent interpretation. Retrieval of the historical situation of women disciples and interpretation yielded by other rhetorical clues has already expanded the possibilities for these two women to symbolize a diversity of gifts functioning in a restored harmony among women disciples.

Later Interpretation of Martha-Mary by Eckhart

Interestingly enough, the fertile imaginations of later followers of Jesus often did surprising things with the figures and themes from Scripture or other extrabiblical sources which enabled them to develop innovative lines of interpretation in order to address a contemporary issue through these symbols. For instance, Meister Eckhart preached a sermon in which Martha's active, robust, and lively energy is actually preferred to the more passive and, from a "conventional" male point-of-view, less problematic Mary. The gist of his interpretation is *not* that Martha is jealous of Mary but that Mary is still immature, seduced by the pleasure of Jesus' company (a symbol for becoming stuck in emotional consolation in prayer) and needs to learn to integrate her God-centeredness with works of compassion. Martha's prayer-request is for Mary's development and

integration and that Jesus' reply indicates to her that this will be fulfilled. Eckhart's sermon shows how Martha is the better model for Christian life because of her maturity and experience. In Eckhart's treatment, Martha symbolizes the integrated contemplative—a woman who does not lose her capacity for contemplation when she is fully active and engaged with worldly work. Would we heard more preaching like this! Or better yet, did this kind of preaching ourselves!

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Eckhart's cultural world included local traditions influenced by women who were freshly asserting their ability and call to participate in apostolic life. Eckhart knew Beguine women who lived lives of intense contemplation which they combined with the works of mercy. Eckhart judged this "mixed life" of active contemplatives superior to and more in harmony with the gospel than those contemplatives withdrawn from apostolic life. In the middle ages, in France, Germany, and Italy, "Martha houses" or convents were institutions which housed this active-contemplative activity.

Eckhart's Adaptation of Legendary Material

Further, *The Golden Legend*, compiled around 1260 by Jacobus de Voragine, was the most widely read book after the Bible in the late middle ages. These richly embellished stories flesh out the gospel images of Martha and Mary quite dramatically. In this legendary material, both Martha and Mary live an apostolic life of missionary journeys, preaching, and miraculous

healing together with their brother Lazarus. They were put on a raft or boat without oars, but landed at Marseilles and worked in Southern France. Martha is identified with the woman cured from the issue of blood and as a powerful protector who overcomes a local dragon, freeing the people from its tyranny.⁷

Eckhart freely weaves elements from all of this material as appropriate symbols for his own theology of the spiritual life. He freely adapts the Scripture in order to use the story as a metaphorical vehicle for his teaching. He presented his sermon text thus:

“Saint Luke writes in the gospel: ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ went into a small city. A woman named Martha received him. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at our Lord’s feet and listened to his words. But Martha went about and served the dear Christ’ (Luke 10:38–40). Eckhart portrays Martha’s relationship to Jesus as one of service and love. Instead of the compulsively busy woman irritated with her sister, Martha is one who serves a cherished friend. Eckhart interprets Martha’s request for help, as not said “out of anger.” “She spoke rather out of loving kindness because she was hard pressed. We must indeed call it a loving kindness or a lovable form of teasing.”⁸

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In this sermon, Eckhart not only reconciles the two sisters, restoring their relationship of love for one another and for Christ, but also reconciles action and contemplation, compassion and love of God. He boldly asserts: “. . . saints may make so much progress that nothing can take them away from God. Even though the heart of such a saint may be grieved that people are not in the state of grace, his or her will remains uniformly in God and says: ‘Lord, I belong to you and you to me!’ Whatever may happen to such a person does not hinder his or her eternal happiness so long as the very peak

of the spirit is not affected in the place where the spirit is united with God’s most precious will.”⁹

The Work Women Do Together: Reciprocity

Patriarchal interpretation when internalized by women, unlike Eckhart’s, has often left women divided among themselves. This has been especially so, in the centuries-long associations of Mary and Martha as representing respectively the contemplative and active lives of lay women and women religious. Lay women become jealous of or resentful of nun-women who appear to them to be in the pre-

petence, and our service to the life of the planet. All this work is an essential aspect of our spirituality. Eckhart’s interpretation moves toward integration in its startling assertions in favor of an on-going centeredness in God, not dependent on activity or inactivity.

Our work-lives of both home and community include other settings as places where we meet God, work for and with God, and mediate God’s presence in the world. God can only act in and through us as we work for justice, to support and nurture our families and communities, to further the reign of God, and to insure continued life on this planet. These are holy works and works which make us holy because we become more human, more ourselves through the creative engagement of our activity and our work. To use a phrase from Maria Harris, they are one form our “artistry” takes. These are holy works because they are at the service of God’s life, human life, and the planet’s life. These are works worth doing; more than that, these works require all the commitment we can bring to them if all forms of life are to survive.

We have lived too long with a dualistic active/contemplative split within ourselves and unnecessary and stupid divisions between women. How might we manage to resist choosing between Martha and Mary? Some women’s traditions have advocated a way of choosing both. The 1955 Constitution of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States did just this. “The spirit of the Institute is Mercy toward those who are afflicted with

ferred or valued Mary-role. Nun-women gain greater self-esteem from having “chosen the better part” and not being poor “Martha’s” yet find they, too, are busy about many things.

Many women feel split between our contemplative selves and our active selves even though we may be more integrated than we realize. The figure of Martha is so unappealing we neglect to honor our own work of home-making, hospitality, entertaining, discipleship, teaching and service. We neglect to appreciate our cocreation, through development of our gifts into com-

ignorance, suffering, and other like miseries. This requires such a combination of the spirit of Mary and Martha that the one does not hinder but helps the other."¹⁰ A profound spiritual reality of reciprocity and interrelationship is implied.

Considering some of the images and symbols evoked by the Martha and Mary stories, we have come full circle from experiencing them as disintegrating symbols maintaining the splits within us, to several lines of interpretation which draw on these two sisters as integrating symbols. The reinterpretation invites identification with both women and harmonizes the split set up by one line of preaching and teaching on contemplation and action.

However, it seems to me that we need something more than merely choosing both together. We need to seek for ourselves images of integration that overcome the seeming fragmentation and polarization fostered so long by some interpretations of this story.

How is life in God more of a unity than two separate identities or compartments? How do our quiet times which we do need and relish help us to find and keep our centers in God? How do our work-lives express our deepest loves, values, and creative energies? How does one moment flow into the next in a reciprocal unity—a both/and in which we experience ourselves not fragmented but essentially whole? How do we find ourselves not isolated from others whose energies differ from ours but linked with them in the dance of life?

Catherine's Integration: Dance and Compass

I offer you two images from Catherine McAuley, founder of the Sisters of Mercy, who in the 1830s struggled to express an integral unity of doing the works of mercy and prayer. One image she drew from the dance: "Amidst all this tripping about, our hearts can always be in the same place, centered in God, for whom alone we go forward or stay back." The other she drew from science—the way a compass functions. Women who are called to labor in the world should be "like the compass that goes round its circle without stirring from its center. Now our center is God from whom all our actions should spring as from their source, and no . . . action should separate us from God." Perhaps other unifying images come to mind which help express the unity of our God experience as it weaves its way throughout our daily round. As women, we will be richer for recognizing and sharing them because they will help us resist the our present oppression within church and society and release even more energy in contemplation, love, and service.



Notes

1. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 53.
2. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: the Challenge of Feminist Biblical*

Interpretation 15–22 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) for the necessity of recognizing the way biblical materials have been used both to maintain women's social oppression as well as to resist that oppression. Her interpretive steps include: suspicion, remembrance, proclamation and creative actualization.

3. See Jane Schaberg, "Luke" in *The Women's Bible Commentary* ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. pp. 288–289, for a summary.
4. I am indebted to Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendell, *The Women Around Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) for first introducing me to the iconography of Martha and Eckhart's Sermons about her. See also Amy Hollywood, "Preaching as Social Practice in Meister Eckhart" in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet Ruffing. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000 for her interpretation of this sermon.
5. This is a Semitic literary form, a type of parallelism in which might be either lines of verse of story units arranged for instance ABCDCBA. Meaning intensifies when the parallelism is recognized. The unit, in this case "D" which stands alone is the climax of the unit.
6. Schaberg, 289.
7. Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. Vol. 2. Trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 23–25.
8. German Sermon #86 of Meister Eckhart in Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in a New Translation* (New York: Image Books, 1980) 478–486.
9. Fox, 485.
10. *Constitutions of the Institute of the Religious Sisters of Mercy of the Union in the United States*