



Café (boldcafe.org) is a monthly on-line magazine for and with young adult women made possible from support from women's groups active in Women of the ELCA (welca.org), the women's organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

09/04/2019 | Monthly Topic

The Enneagram and God's grace

by Erin Strybis

Just one more basket of laundry, then I'll go work out. Sun spills through the blinds of my son's room as I sit cross-legged folding toddler-size pants and shirts. Head pounding, I gaze at the dog, sprawled out on the colorful carpet. But what I could really use is a nap.

Instead, I hit "play" and reach for a pair of navy dinosaur socks. Music floods the room and the lyrics snap me to attention.

My hands begin to shake. Without warning, my cheeks are wet. The words of the song wash over me, the crescendo builds, and suddenly it feels impossible to continue listening. I punch "pause" on the song — "Two" by Sleeping At Last. And there, among my neat little stacks of clothes, I release my tired body to the floor and sob.

There's a reason why that song had a profound effect on me. Its writer, Ryan O'Neal of Sleeping At Last, designed it that way. He wrote nine different songs, one tailored to each Enneagram type.

The Enneagram is a personality-type framework that centers on motivations, spiritual gifts and

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shortcomings. What sets this framework apart from others is that it offers a pathway to spiritual and personal growth.

There are nine personality types represented in the Enneagram, each corresponding to a number. My number is two, otherwise known as The Helper. No type is better than the other; all are interconnected.

As described in *The Road Back to You* by Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile, those types are:

- 1. The Perfectionist:** Ones are ethical, critical and determined to reform the world. Core motivation: perfection.
- 2. The Helper:** Kind and friendly Twos find purpose in caring for others but often fail to acknowledge their own needs. Core motivation: love.
- 3. The Performer:** Image-conscious Threes pursue success, which can rob them of contentment. Core motivation: admiration.
- 4. The Romantic:** Creative and emotional Fours long to be understood and to stand out. Core motivation: uniqueness.
- 5. The Investigator:** Analytical thinkers who enjoy amassing knowledge, Fives prefer to work alone. Core motivation: learning.
- 6. The Loyalist:** Sixes are deeply committed to others, and their suspicion of the unknown makes them good problem-solvers. Core motivation: security.
- 7. The Enthusiast:** Free-spirited and fun-loving Sevens are easily distracted. Core motivation: happiness.
- 8. The Challenger:** Innovative and aggressive Eights love power and control, creating change and seeking conflict. Core motivation: strength.
- 9. The Peacemaker:** Easygoing Nines aim to cultivate harmony and avoid conflict. Core motivation: peace.

There are several tests you can take to pinpoint your number; however, simply reading in-depth descriptions of the personality types can bring about recognition. To determine your type, Cron and Stabile advise asking yourself why you do the things you do.

When I first read The Enneagram Institute's description of "Two", my face grew hot. "[Twos] believe they must always put others first and be loving and unselfish if they want to get love," it says. "The problem is that 'putting others first' makes Twos secretly angry and resentful, feelings they work hard to repress or deny." I wondered, Could my desire to serve others be self-serving?

I thought of my past — how, as a new member of my congregation, I'd thrown my heart into planning socials, Bible studies and celebrations. Later I joined Council and the Call Committee, doubling the time I spent at church. At low moments, I grew to resent those leadership opportunities.

I thought of my current reality as the working mother of a toddler. In the midst of juggling work deadlines and pediatrician visits, I'd failed to make a doctor's appointment for myself. Weekday

mornings, I'd often set out breakfast for my son but skip my own to save time. I repeatedly deny myself care, then end up burned out.

What I could see more clearly is that I often adopted the role of Martha, helpful to a fault, never stopping to rest, because I was desperate to earn love. Face to face with my sinfulness, I wallowed in self-loathing. I didn't want to be a Two. In prayer, I pleaded with God, "Help me be different."

Months later I was riding in the car with my cousin Lia and the subject of the Enneagram came up. "I have a love/hate relationship with the Enneagram," I confessed to her, clutching the steering wheel tightly. "It's hard to be reminded of my shadow side."

"What number are you?" she asked.

"Two," I groaned.

"Me too!" she replied, nodding her head knowingly.

"The struggle is real," I laughed, going on to air my frustrations with myself.

After I'd finished, Lia thought for a moment and added, "Erin, you have to listen to Sleeping At Last's song 'Two.' I'll send you a link."

I nodded, but I doubted I'd follow through. I couldn't understand why she wanted me to listen to something that would make me confront my brokenness.

Back on the floor of my son's room, I lie next to my dog stroking his soft fur. I'm home on a weekday morning because I finally had the wherewithal to recognize I needed a personal day. My son is at daycare and my work's covered, but true to type, I'd spent the morning doing housework instead of engaging in self-care.

Wiping away tears, I now know why Lia wanted me to listen to this song. Up until that moment, I hadn't allowed myself to celebrate my strengths as a Two. Each Enneagram personality, in its most healthy expression, reflects an aspect of God's expansive love for us. In the case of Twos, we offer boundless generosity and unconditional love.

The truth is, I've always ached to love and be loved, but I wrestle with loving myself. Hearing my own melody helped me see my innate holiness—made in God's image, blessed and broken, sinner and saint.

Thomas Merton wrote, "The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image." And my faith teaches that God loves me just as I am; there is nothing I can do to earn God's grace.





Could I begin to love and forgive myself the way God does? I unfold myself from the floor, pick up my phone and hit “play” again. I abandon the laundry basket and walk to the kitchen in search of nourishment.

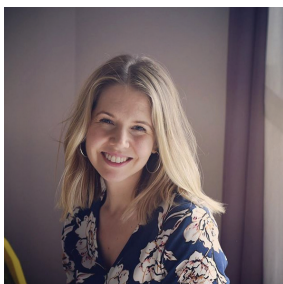
The answer is, undoubtedly, yes.

Discussion questions:

1. How well do you know yourself? Are you familiar with your Enneagram number or any other personality type framework? Do you find such tools helpful or a hindrance?
2. What are your spiritual gifts? What about your shortcomings?
3. Where have you seen God’s grace present in your life?

Closing prayer:

Holy and omniscient God,
You know us in our shortcomings and our strengths. You know the burdens we carry and you know our blessings. Restore us with the deep peace that comes from knowing there’s nothing we can do to earn your love—we already have it. In your name we pray, Amen.



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This article first appeared in the September 2019 issue of *Cafe*.

What Scripture says about God's love

by Erin Strybis

As far as Bible characters go, I've always identified more with Martha than Mary. In Luke 10:38-42, when Martha opens her home to Jesus and his disciples, I understand why she's "distracted with many things." The disciples were likely tired, smelly and a bit hangry from journeying alongside Jesus. Have you ever tried to host a dozen or more guests? That's a lot of mouths to feed.

Last spring, I opened up my own home to a new group. It was my first time hosting our neighborhood book club, and I wanted to get everything right. So I planned healthy, delicious appetizers, bought extra wine glasses and discerned the perfect living-room arrangement for facilitating conversation. I even agonized over what I couldn't fix — the dated window treatments that had come with the house, peeling baseboards and an old couch we hoped to sell.

On the day of book club, as my guests entered I couldn't help but busy myself with tasks to make them more comfortable. Pouring wine and restocking food became a welcome distraction from the insecurities I harbored about our house. (An aside: What is it that makes us hold so much shame about our homes?) Though I am beyond blessed with a comfortable, beautiful home, I worried about how my neighbors would perceive it and, also, me. If I played the role of hostess just right, I could win over these relatively new friends.

God wants to be in relationship with us

Sound familiar? Like Martha, my hostess-heart hoped to earn my guests' affection through service. Because I busied myself with many things, I nearly missed the one thing we had all gathered for — to spend time with each other. Unlike Martha, I had no sister to complain about to Jesus, but I needed his kind, hard rebuke just as much as she did.





“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing,” Jesus says. “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:40-42).

As readers, we might be surprised by Jesus’ words. Shouldn’t he be criticizing Mary for leaving her sister with all the work? Instead, he praises her for sitting at his feet and listening.

I don’t think Jesus is being an ungrateful house guest here. His words offer us hope and show us that he desires to be in relationship with us. This Bible story shows us that God loves us not for what we do but who we are — God’s children. God does not need us to busy ourselves with passing and refilling wine glasses or gathering up dirty dishes; God wants us to open our hearts to God’s presence.

Once I finally did allow myself to settle in and be present to my book club, I realized that my guests had barely noticed all the flaws in my house. While they appreciated being served, they seemed relieved when I finally sat down and engaged in conversation. Free of distractions, I had a chance to listen and grow in relationship with them.

God’s love is unconditional

So we’ve established that God does not love us for what we do. Yet the reality of being a person in the world is that at some point you have to do the dirty dishes. With so many distractions—technology being chief among them for us—we may find we are not always up to the task of simply doing life. Or maybe we find we’re so distracted by doing life, we forget to care for our souls.

Scripture offers guidance when we feel weighed down by our many tasks, like Martha, or when we find ourselves frustrated by our shortcomings and sins. We may feel spiritually parched.

Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

We can find peace and rest in the knowledge that the trappings of this world aren’t the end goal. There is more to the story. Because God knew we could not save ourselves, he sent his only son Jesus into the world to save us from sin, and God prepares a place for believers in heaven.

This is the greatest love story of the Bible. God loves us so much he rescues us and gives us new life. To know I am helpless—drowning—in my sin is both humbling and freeing.

To be grounded by grace means living with an awareness that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves—God’s got that covered. Thanks be to God.

Discussion questions

1. How would you describe yourself: like a Martha or a Mary?
2. Do you have a verse or story you often turn to for comfort? What does scripture tell you about God's love?
3. Why is unconditional love so radical for the church and society?

Closing prayer

Heavenly God, We know we don't have to earn your love, but sometimes we forget. More than anything, you crave a relationship with us and love without conditions. You love us so much you gave your only son Jesus as a living sacrifice. Lift our anxious hearts with the hope of his life, death and resurrection. Amen.



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