

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, October 9, 2011

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 284, 347:1, 366:1-4, 366:5-6, 293.

Lessons: Psalm 119:30-49, Romans 8:b-17, John 8:31-32.

Sermon Text: Luke 10:38-42.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

For almost every occupation or calling there is something that is essential. It may be a tool, or some knowledge, or some raw material. Today we consider what is essential for a Christian, a child of God.

Martha and Mary are sisters of the man Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead – only to die eventually. We read in John 11:5: "*Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*"

But our sermon text introduces an idea that is essential for the calling and life of every Christian. Today we are reminded of

THE ONE THING NEEDED

- 1. Martha was distracted by earthly preparations when Jesus was present in her life.**
- 2. Mary chose the one thing needful, what is better, what will not be taken away from her.**

Martha is certainly a woman to be admired. She "*opened her home to*" Jesus – and no doubt his disciples. At a time in history before all the conveniences we have in our kitchens, it was no small task to prepare and provide a meal for a dozen or more men. She made Jesus welcome in her home. Martha is to be commended for her willingness to serve Jesus in earthly matters. But it seems that she wasn't quite as ready to be served by Jesus in spiritual, eternal matters as was her sister Mary.

Her preparations – and we have to assume that at least one meal was involved – didn't have available to her the conveniences we have today: all the prepared foods, ovens as we know them, microwave ovens, freezers and refrigerators. Even the simplest diet would have required baking some kind of bread. Preparation of any meat was also labor-intensive. So you can be sure that Martha felt pressured to get a lot done in a short time. Which of you, women in particular, hasn't felt much the same way she did, when there was a lot of work to do but no one was helping you? Normally, we could assume that her sister would be helping her. But that is not the case on this particular day.

Martha was distracted by the preparations, drawn away from hearing the Word of God. She was concerned about providing for Jesus and those with him; wondering how she would get every thing done and hoping that every thing would be done in a proper way. She had a great deal of work on her hands and her mind, which distracted her thoughts, and took them off spiritual matters, and concerned her greatly. It is likely that she was sparing no cost or effort, thinking nothing too good, or too grand, for such a guest as she had in her house.

But her sister Mary isn't helping with the preparations. Mary is sitting at the feet of the Lord Jesus listening to what he has to say, not knowing when she would have another such chance to hear Jesus. And, as Martha feels and says, she thinks Mary has more important things to do. Martha becomes irritated and asks the Lord to put Mary to work helping her.

We must either sit at Christ's feet or be made his footstool; but, if we sit with him at his feet now, we shall sit with him at his throne in eternity.

Martha asks "***Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!***" Was she perhaps angry as some have suggested? She was surely distracted and burdened by doing all the preparations herself. She seems to condemn her sister for listening to Jesus and not helping with preparations.

But Jesus does not agree with Martha's assessment of the problem. It is Martha who has the problem, and not Mary. Jesus plainly says "***Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.***" Martha is distracted by many things; Mary is satisfied with the one thing needful.

Jesus rebukes Martha. He emphatically calls her name twice. He speaks of the "***many things***" – the preparations, which so captured her attention that she missed her Lord's teaching. He says that she is "***troubled about many things***" v. 41, King James Version. It was not essential to him that she should seek to please him with a rich banquet for him. He hints that that she was over anxious, and more thoughtful and careful about earthly things than she needed to be. While we always want to give and do our best for Our Lord, we dare not let such things detract from the really important thing: hearing Jesus' words. Those Christ loves he rebukes and chastens. He speaks as one deeply concerned for her welfare – her eternal spiritual welfare.

We have in Mary an example of quiet listening. Martha is very busy serving "her neighbor", but what she is doing is not so essential as what Mary is doing. Any service intended to be for God which bypasses the Word of God is one that will never have lasting benefit.

Mary was gladly hearing and learning the Word of God, and so following the heart of the Third Commandment.

What was it that Mary was hearing? What was the contents of Jesus message? Surely he was preaching Law and Gospel, the two chief teachings of the Bible. Certainly he was teaching Law to show the sinfulness of all mankind – and particularly the people listening to him on this day, and certainly he was teaching the Gospel to show that he, Jesus, is the one who takes away all our sins, first by his living the perfect life we never could, and secondly by dying on the cross to pay the price for all our sins – for all the sins of all mankind. Now Jesus may not have been quite so specific. He may not have at this time foretold his dying on the cross, because the evangelists make it clear when Jesus is telling his followers that he must go up to Jerusalem, suffer, and be crucified.

But we should know that surely Jesus was preaching these kinds of things. Surely he was not just telling stories or jokes. Surely he was striking their hearts, as the law does. For when we examine our lives according to the moral law of God, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, we feel our sinfulness. Our consciences trouble us. We realize we cannot appease the almighty God. AND most certainly he was speaking of the peace we have in knowing our sins are forgiven by God, for Jesus' sake.

Mary was commended for choosing that which shall not be taken away from her. She was feeding faith which comes only from hearing the Word of God. The Word of God leads to eternal life, while earthly food leads only to being hungry for another meal.

"Only one thing is needed" – this one thing that she is receiving, to give up herself to the guidance of Christ, and receive the Words of God from the mouth of the only Savior of mankind. The knowledge that ***"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved"*** Mark 16:16 was being engrained in Mary's mind and heart. It was something that ***"will not be taken away."*** Martha's choice would be taken from her, for her services would die with her. Mary's choice would never be taken away from her, for it was a spiritual and eternal choice.

This is an excellent example for all Christian households. Jesus should be the Friend, the ever-welcome Guest in every Christian home. In the prayers before and after meals, in family worship, in the prayers at bedtime His gracious presence should be invited, and the affairs of the entire household should always be conducted in such a manner that the Lord will be glad to make His home in the midst of such a family circle. Joshua said it well when he said ***"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."*** Joshua 24:18.

There is no reason why our parents, too, can't and shouldn't be involved in the spiritual instruction of their children as provided through the church. Parents are welcome to come to Catechism Instruction class and see what your children are learning and how well they are learning it. Parents are also surely welcome to sit in on Sunday School to see what your children are learning, and how they are learning.

Martha seems to have been the older of the sisters, since we find her directing the affairs of the home and assuming the part of the hostess. But her sister Mary found a better use for her time than busying herself with household matters. Just as Jesus always taught the matters concerning the kingdom of God with great willingness, so Mary absorbed His teaching with quiet enthusiasm. So absorbed was she in the words of eternal truth that came from the mouth of Jesus that here she appeared to forget every thing else. Martha, on the other hand, like homemakers the world over, was over-busy to serve the distinguished guest properly, being a good hostess. We see here two forms of service, each done for the Lord, each with the best of intentions, the one with the work of the hands, the other in listening to the words of eternal wisdom. But we must remember to put first things first, to put the most important, the essential things first. This is a lesson Martha had not yet learned. She was not happy that she was obliged to do the work of preparing the meals and – as she thought – serving the Lord all alone. And so she finally stepped up and said: Lord, doesn't it bother you that my sister lets me serve alone? Tell her that she should help me. There is a certain amount of resentment even against Jesus noticeable in these words, as if she would indicate that the Lord might stop teaching for a while and see to it that she got some help with the household duties. Jesus, however, tells the harassed hostess patiently and kindly, but also firmly, that she was bothering and concerning herself about many things that would not last.

There is only one thing that is needful in this world, which must be placed ahead of all other things. That is the Word of the Gospel, and faith in that Word of God which gives salvation. This good part Mary had chosen. She had found in the Word the peace which passes all things of this world. She was being prepared for eternal life. And that good part shall be taken neither from Mary nor from any other believer. The things of this world pass away, ***"But the word of the Lord endureth for ever."*** 1 Peter 1:25, King James Version. Mary chose a better way of honoring Christ and of pleasing him, by receiving his word into her heart, than Martha did by providing for his earthly provisions in her house.

The Word of God is something that shall never be taken away from those that have it. Things in this life will certainly be taken away from us and food will need to be prepared again tomorrow. Sooner or later, we will not need food any more, at the moment of our death. However, nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ, and our share in that love. Men and devils cannot take it away from us, and God and Christ will not. Every one of us must choose this good part to share in the eternal life Christ offers. We must be concerned about spiritual matters, about that which leads to life everlasting.

Christ tells us to ***"search the scriptures"***: John 5:39 King James Version. ***"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me."*** John 5:39 New International Version.

May God lead us to choose the "one thing needful", the one thing necessary each day and make time for it in our lives so that the gift of eternal life is ours! Amen.