

"ONE Necessary Thing"

Luke 10:38-42

July 18, 2010

8th Sunday After Pentecost

There are many fairy tales in which someone is granted three wishes. Have you ever wondered why it's always "three"? I don't know what is magical about that number, but it is pretty easy to understand why it is not one wish that is offered: no one could possibly narrow down their desires to merely one wish. There are so many things that we think we want, if asked to wish for one thing, we probably couldn't do it.

The same is true for our needs. Can we narrow our needs down to the one necessary thing that we need which we could not do without? There are so many things to choose from, some of which are bad, but many of which are good. In an attempt to get what is necessary for our lives, we can become stressed out.

That was Martha's problem in our text today. She was not doing anything wrong or sinful. She was doing something very good. She was serving Jesus by cleaning her house and preparing a meal for him. And she was getting stressed out in doing it.

We, too, fill our lives with good things. We want our families to have good things in life so we work hard for many hours at our jobs to have the money to obtain these things. We buy and take care of many possessions. Our children join athletic teams and clubs at school which involves meetings and practices. Adults become involved in many leisure activities, especially here in Montana. We volunteer to serve at school and community events. We may even fill our lives with religious commitments - teaching Sunday School, VBS, or Midweek School, serving as officers in the congregation or on boards and committees, and so on.

What's the problem then? As Martha was doing something very good for Jesus, we, too, are doing things that are very good for ourselves, our children, our church, and our community. It is not that these things are bad or sinful, but that there are so many of them and they stress us out, causing

us to be worried and upset about having enough time, enough money, and enough ability to meet our busy, self-imposed schedules.

That was Martha's problem. Jesus said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things," Martha was worried about getting everything "just so" for Jesus, cooking and serving the meal, and so on. She was upset that her sister, Mary, wasn't helping her. This caused her to complain to Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me!"

But, even more important than the stress which all of these good things cause is the fact that these things distract us from the one thing that *is* needed. Our text says "Martha was distracted with much serving." Distracted *from* what? She was distracted from doing what her sister, Mary, was doing: sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to His Word.

When we are faced with an overload of responsibilities and activities in our job, our school, our recreation time, and our community, we, too, get distracted from listening to the Word of God. We neglect attending church on Sunday morning and hearing the Word of God. Midweek services during Lent and Advent also get squeezed out by other considerations. How often I've heard people tell me, "I couldn't come to worship because of _____ (work, sporting event, family gathering, and so on)." How often I've wondered if anyone has ever told someone, "I can't come to _____ (work, sporting event, family gathering, and so on) because I am going to worship." Have you ever said it?

Even if we do come to worship, we may not stay to hear God's Word in more depth in Bible Class because we are so busy with the day ahead. We not only miss out, but we teach our children by example that Bible Study is something for children only. And, even if we do come to church, Sunday School, and Bible Class faithfully, we can easily find ourselves distracted from Monday - Saturday so that we have no time to hear the Word of God as we read it individually or together as families. Our schedules are just too jam packed to fit it in.

The harmful effect of sinful things is obvious. They cut us off from God. As good Lutherans, we are smart enough to avoid that problem. The harmful effect of good things is much more subtle and insidious. They distract us from God which doesn't seem harmful at the beginning, but is the first step towards being cut off from God. We go from not having time for the Word of God to not caring about the Word of God to "despising preaching and His Word", as Luther says in his explanation to the 3rd Commandment. As good Lutherans we may not be aware that this problem exists or we may try to deny it exists by defending the goodness of these activities that make us so busy, claiming we have no choice in the matter of our scheduling, or by "poo-pooing" what the preacher says, attributing it to his crankiness or his dismay over poor church attendance.

But the problem does exist and Jesus recognized it. In dealing with it, He does not criticize Martha's activities in our text, nor is He upset with her for what she is doing. He simply tries to encourage her, not to give up her activities, but reset her priorities from what is merely helpful in living her life to what is necessary to live her life; from what is good to what is better. He says, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion."

In contrast to the many things of Martha which caused her to worry, to be upset, and to be distracted, the one thing that is needed which Mary chose - to listen to the Word of her Lord - brought peace and eternal blessing. In our fast paced world, to take time out to sit and listen to the Word of God - in our church, in our classrooms, and in our homes - seems to be such a waste of time. More productive things could be getting accomplished in that time. That was Martha's thought process. The house could be getting cleaned; the meal could be getting prepared; and so on.

We think the same way. Think of how much more work could be accomplished on Sunday if you didn't have to come for church. Think of how much more sleep you could catch up on if you didn't have to be here by 9:30 AM. Think of how much more fun you could have watching TV or being with your friends if you didn't take time to read your Bible or have devotions with your family.

The only problem is that all of these things - work, sleep, fun, recreation, and the like - may give you what you want or what you think you need, but those things will not last and cannot give you what you really need. Listening to the Word of God is not a religious ritual for us to endure, nor is it an intellectual exercise that we must achieve. Listening to the Word of God is a way to receive the true and lasting gifts which God wishes to give you. Any of you who have a garden know that the rain from the heavens is very precious. Why? It's not because the water looks good or because it teaches plants how to grow, but it has power to cause plants to grow and bear fruit. The Word of God is the same. God says in Isaiah 55:10-11, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

The Word of God has power. It does not merely offer moral guidance or just teach us about God's love, forgiveness, peace, hope, and eternal life. The Word of God gives these timeless gifts to us as we have it splashed on us in Holy Baptism, as we hear it read and preached, and as we taste it in Holy Communion. We gather to hear the Word in our church and to read the Word of God in our homes, not because we have to in order to fulfill our religious duty, but because we want to.

Does a starving man "have to" eat the bountiful banquet set before him without cost or obligation? Does the woman dying of thirst in the hot sun "have to" drink the crystal clear ice cold water offered to her? Of course not! They joyfully and eagerly eat and drink to satisfy their hunger and thirst. Our souls are starving and the junk food that this world offers in materialism and entertainment satisfies, at best, for a short time. Our souls are dry and parched and drinking from the well of occupational, community, or even church involvement is like drinking salt water. We only get thirstier and, eventually, it will kill us.

Trying to do religious things to satisfy this need doesn't help. Martha made the mistake of thinking that she was the host who was to serve and Jesus was the guest to be served. But Jesus

said, "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:28) Jesus is the host and we are the guests to be served. What we do here on Sunday morning is called "Divine Service". It is first and foremost God's service to us. Going to church isn't doing God a favor. We go so that God can do for us. The best service you can do for God is letting *Him* serve *you*. Here, Jesus serves us with His Word. Here, through "the one thing needed", He gives us the things of lasting importance which we truly need. The forgiveness which He won by dying on the cross, He speaks to us in the Holy Absolution. The new life which He won for us by rising from the dead is given to us as He speaks His Word with the application of water. The nurturing of our new lives in Him through the strengthening of our faith is given to us as He speaks His Word over the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine. Jesus promises that when we choose His Word – the good portion – these things will not and cannot be taken away from us.

Often, we think that the only conflict that we have as Christians in this world is the choice between good things and sinful things. If that were the case, it would be relatively easy. However, that's not always the case. Sometimes, the choice is between good things and better things. That makes it difficult because we think that, if we are doing things that are good for ourselves, our family, our church, and our community, then we are doing what God wants and that we will always be safe in our relationship with Him. That's not always the case. Martha chose what was good. Mary chose what was best. Jesus does not condemn the actions of Martha or say that she shouldn't do them. He simply says that there is only one thing that is *necessary* - that which Mary had chosen - listening to the Word of God. You face the same choices every day. Jesus does not condemn golfing or camping, sleeping or resting, family gatherings or vacations, athletics, community organizations, or the like. These are all good. The best, though, is still His Word. Will you be Martha? Will you be Mary? Will you choose the good at the risk of losing the best? Or, will you choose the best and, having that, enjoy the good things in life? Think carefully about it. May God help you always to make wise choices. Amen.