

## **“The Necessary Thing”**

### **Luke 10:38-42**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I’m sure at one time or another we’ve all found ourselves in the shoes of Martha. There are guests over at your house and you become overly consumed with the state of your abode. Frantically cleaning in preparation (because we all know the guests are going to use a white glove to check if the baseboards are clean), constantly serving and offering food or drink to your guests and soliciting feedback to make sure it meets their standards, the never-ending cleaning up after people, and the list just goes on. And amidst all of that effort, your spouse, sibling, or whoever you might expect to be providing a helping hand is off sitting on the couch chatting it up with friends. Time passes, and the anger and frustration well up inside of you as you think of all the work you have done to keep everyone entertained. After all of that, in a flash, the party is over. You missed out on visiting with your friends or relatives, reliving old times and catching up on the new. Was it worth it—the constant need to do something to please the people who just wanted your time and to see you? All that effort was seemingly for naught, because it was not the necessary thing on which you should have been focused.

If we think about that in the context of our Gospel lesson, we can see that Mary and Martha are on two opposite ends of the spectrum at this gathering. Martha is the one frantically cleaning, doing dishes and serving food and drink non-stop as the rest sit and listen to the words of their Savior. And that is where Martha’s sister, Mary, sits. You can really feel the tension in her voice when she confronts Jesus about Mary’s seeming laziness. “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me (Luke 10:40:b).” No one likes to do all the work themselves. It’s easier when you have help, right? After all, if Mary would have just helped Martha, then she would have finished all the serving, and then maybe they both could have at least caught the end of Jesus’ teaching. But nooo, Mary had the audacity to sit at the Lord’s feet listening to Him instead of helping her.

You have to wonder where Martha’s head is in all of this. Clearly, she is bothered by her sister’s lack of assistance, but she also is no stranger to who Jesus is. She greeted Him with great joy when He arrived, and she calls Him Lord when she addresses Him. Why would she not willingly choose to focus on hearing Him instead of making sure there were enough snacks and drinks? This is the nature of the sinful flesh. Martha wanted to please and impress her guest, and so she did everything she possibly could to serve Him through her works. This account of Martha and Mary is a major detriment to

the works righteousness and self-centered worship crowd. Because what they are doing is exactly what Martha does in our text. Instead of focusing on the teaching of Jesus, the Word of the Word made flesh, hearing and receiving what He has come to bring, they focus on what they do for Him.

That is the entire central theme of contemporary worship. It's all about making sure I do as much as I can do to "praise the Lord" and make me feel good along the way. Jesus refutes that philosophy with one simple reply, "One thing is necessary." And that "one thing" is not the things that we do for God, because in our depraved state, nothing we do can be for Him, neither does He need anything from us. As sinful and rebellious children, our loving God gives us the one thing necessary, and that one thing is Jesus, His only Son. Nothing we think we are doing for God is ever the one thing necessary. The things we do in the divine service are a response of thanksgiving for all that He has come here to do for us, not making a bunch of noise and flapping our arms around like a whacky-waving-inflatable-arm-flailing-tube-man outside a used car dealership.

But an important thing to note in all of this is that Jesus doesn't rebuke Martha and tell her she shouldn't be doing the work she is performing. He simply tells her that her sister has chosen "the good portion." Despite the chaos that may be going on in her life and around her at this gathering, Mary's focus is clear and direct. Her focus is the salvation that Jesus has come into the world to bring to her and to all people. She sits and listens so that she might hear from the very mouth of her Savior that she has been forgiven and is redeemed by His blood. And that "good portion" shall not be taken away from her by forcing her into a practice of works that must be done for the Lord. Yet, as I just said, Martha is not rebuked for her works. What she is doing is indeed necessary, but it is not the sole thing that should be in her purview.

When we discuss the things of the divine service, for example, they are all indeed necessary. The call of Psalm 95:1-2 echoes in our ears as we do indeed offer worship and praise to our Savior and Redeemer: "Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to Him with songs of praise!" We are commanded to offer praise and thanksgiving in our worship, but it is to be done in response to the one thing necessary. It is to be done in reverence for that which He comes here to give to us freely by His grace. Only then can we truly worship in Spirit and in truth as Jesus says in John 4 to the Samaritan woman at the well. Our worship is to be one of order in accordance with the Word of God as its only guide. That is what Paul commends the church in Colossae for in Colossians 2:5, where the Apostle writes, "For

though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.”

Mary is being commended for her good order and firmness of faith in Christ. Martha is not rebuked for her works, but told that they are secondary to the truth of the Gospel. Works follow faith; they don't prepare one for it. No amount of work that Martha does will make everything perfect for the reception of Jesus' words. All she must do is hear it, for “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17).” Martha's works are done from a heart of faith. She is genuinely seeking to please the Lord, but she's got it backward. Salvation first, hearing the Word of salvation first, and then works follow. This is what Luther intends to point out in his morning prayer:

“I thank you, my Heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.”

Not, “May all my doings and life please You so that You keep me from sin and every evil (or worse yet that by my doings and life I will be kept from sin and every evil and prepared to let you in),” but the Lord is the one who keeps us from sin and every evil, and in response to that great gift we do those things which are pleasing to Him. And the only way we have the capability of doing such things is by the power of Christ which lives in us according to our baptismal identity. We commend ourselves to Him who is the necessary thing. Our bodies, our souls, and all things are in His hands, and out of His hands we perform great deeds that are worthy of praise to Him, not for ourselves. There we have the good portion which shall not be taken away from us. No one will snatch us out of His hand.

When we have been given the opportunity to sit at the feet of our Lord and Savior and hear His words, that is what we should be doing. At every opportunity, we come here where the Word is preached in its truth and purity and the Sacraments rightly administered according to Christ's institution, and we listen. That is the necessary thing, the one thing needful. We hear the forgiving word of salvation from the very mouth of the Son of God and through faith we are justified by His grace. We receive His very body and blood in our mouths and “taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8).” We remember our baptisms to drown out the desires of the sinful flesh which would have us focus on the unnecessary things that seek to pull us away from Jesus. Only by His grace

do we receive these gifts, and because of that undeserved kindness, we have the good portion.

The good portion awaits us in the heavenly places, where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. That's what He says in John 14:3, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." Yet, even as we await the fulfillment of that good portion, it is ours already by faith. We live in the light of His grace as it has been revealed to us by His Word, and our inheritance has been given to us according to the Father's love for His only begotten Son. The Gospel treasures we possess are the good portion on this side of heaven, because in them we see what lies ahead, knowing that there is a perfect heavenly home that awaits us when we are called into His presence. And there we will dwell for eternity with all the saints who have gone before us, living in eternal bliss with He who is the necessary thing—our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen