

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

THE ONE GOOD AND NECESSARY THING

Luke 10:38-42; Proper 11C-Pentecost 5C; July 19-20, 2025

I can sympathize with Martha in our Gospel today as she was hosting a houseful of guests. If the Twelve apostles were with Jesus, then the minimum number of guests Martha had in her home was 13. Jesus always drew a crowd wherever He went; the number of houseguests could have been more. Luke describes Martha as “**distracted with much serving.**” The word for “distracted” has the sense of being pulled at; Martha was being dragged this way and that without a chance to catch her breath.

Apparently, Martha had assumed that her sister, Mary, would help her. When she did not but sat at Jesus’ feet listening to His teaching, we can hear the exasperation in Martha’s voice as she spoke to Jesus. “**Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?**” “Doesn’t it bother you seeing me doing all this work for You while my lazy sister sits there doing nothing?” “[Jesus,] **Tell her to help me.**” If I were in Martha’s situation, I probably would have resented Mary, and Jesus’ response would not be what I was looking for. “**Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.**”

What is the **one good and necessary thing** Jesus praised Mary for? She was sitting at Jesus’ feet listening to His teaching, His Word; Mary was doing the **one thing needful**. Martha wanted Mary to stop doing this for the **many things** she was doing for Jesus and His disciples, but Jesus would not take from her the **good portion**. What is Jesus teaching us about faith in Him and life as Christians?

Before getting into that, notice that Jesus did not condemn Martha’s service. Martha was doing a good work serving Jesus and His disciples. Out of faith in Jesus, Martha had welcomed them into her home. Martha was one of those people who recognizes the needs of others and is ready to jump in and do whatever is necessary. You and I know people like that. They struggle to say “no” to any request. Even if they have no time, they make time. If they are busy with other things, they get busier. Our church and school would suffer greatly if we didn’t have such people among us. We rely on them.

Jesus did not condemn Martha's good service, but noted that it was distracting her, pulling her away from the one, **necessary** thing. The **many things** she was doing made her anxious and troubled. If there is a fault with the "Marthas" of this world it is that they think that they are in control. They take it upon themselves to fix everything wrong they see. If things start to get out of their control, they become anxious and worried. When things stop going the way they think they should, or discover that they can't fix what is wrong, they will often blame others.

Martha started feeling overwhelmed by the tasks she had taken on; she needed to be in three places at the same time. She blamed Mary and thought Jesus should agree with her. "**Lord, don't You care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me.**" Martha told Jesus to stop teaching Mary. **But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."**

There are times we need to be a Martha, but there are also times we need to be a Mary choosing **the one thing necessary, the good portion**. What did Mary choose instead of serving Jesus and His disciples with Martha? Jesus was there to teach His Word. Mary **sat at Jesus' feet listening to His Word and teaching**.

What did He teach? Luke says that Jesus and His disciples were there **on their way**. On their way where? **Jesus had set His face to go to Jerusalem** where He would suffer, die, and rise for us and for our salvation. According to John's Gospel, Martha's home was in Bethany, a village not far from Jerusalem where Jesus' saving work would be accomplished. Bethany was where Jesus had raised Lazarus, Martha and Mary's brother, from the dead.

Jesus had important things to teach, and Martha's hectic serving was distracting her from hearing that Word. Jesus was teaching faith and life in God's kingdom. Jesus was there to do His saving work, and Martha was too busy to even notice because she was anxious and troubled by **many things**. Jesus did not commend Martha, but Mary for choosing the **one thing needful** by sitting at His feet hearing His Word. Jesus, the Savior, was there to serve them.

More important than us serving Jesus is Jesus serving us through His Holy Word and sacraments. This is what Jesus teaches us today. Being in church today is being a “Mary” sitting at Jesus’ feet and hearing Him. Now, you’re thinking, “I’m sitting, but I’m hearing Pastor Bertram,” and you would be right. But whenever your pastor speaks God’s Word in Christ, you hear Jesus Himself speak to you. Remember what Jesus said to the 72 before He sent them out in His name: **The one who hears you hears Me** (Lk 10:16a). And the Word of Christ is powerful and does what it says.

When your pastor speaks Jesus’ words, you hear Jesus speak to you. This is what pastors are called and ordained to do. This verse from Luke 10, **The one who hears you hears Me**, is one of the most quoted in the Lutheran Confessions when teaching on the pastoral office, and for good reason. It defines what it means to be a preacher in the church and what it means to be a hearer in the church.

We call the Chief Service we use today the Divine Service, a translation of the German word, *Gottesdienst*, literally, “God’s Service,” the service done by God for us. A false teaching that gained prominence in the mid-20th century reversed this by claiming that worship is primarily something we do for God, “man’s service to God.” This was Martha’s theology of worship. She wanted Jesus to say to Mary, “Help your sister, Martha, serve Me.” Martha thought that the highest worship was what she could do for Jesus, not what Jesus was doing for Mary, and her.

Martha was wrong about that, and so are all those who say the worship service is primarily about what we do for God. Certainly, worship is not just passive; we actively love and support each other just by being here. Musicians work at leading the singing of the hymns and liturgy; pastors preach and preside at the altar, being “Marthas” on the Lord’s Day. Ushers, altar guild servers, and worship assistants have duties to carry out, but that service is all for the sake of hearing Jesus and should not interfere with the **one thing needful**.

Mary wasn’t being lazy sitting at Jesus’ feet; she was hard at work listening to His teaching. Jesus said that she had chosen the **good portion**, which is often much harder work than doing something else.

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Attending and participating in the Divine Service is the **good portion** that God has given us to do today. We get to come into the Lord's house as His guest where He serves us through His holy Word and Sacrament. We have heard Jesus' Word of forgiveness of sins in the Absolution. I, your pastor, spoke it, but it was Jesus we hear forgiving our sins. **"The one who hears you hears Me."** We heard Jesus teaching us in the liturgy of the Word and the preaching. In a little while Jesus will wait on us at His Table, where He will serve us the feast of His own body and blood, given and shed on the cross and risen from the dead. Before we leave this place today, He will bless us with His own name, the Lord.

Our neighbor always needs our love and service, but God in Christ is here to serve us through His Holy Word.

If you want to serve God today in worship, do what God has called you to do in your various vocations, places in life. If you are a husband and father, bring your wife and children to church and lead by example through your active participation in the Service. If you are a wife and mother, support your husband in this. If you are single or widowed, being here with your fellow Christians shows your love and support for them; receiving their support and love for you is good work. If you are a child, honor your father and mother: don't whine or complain about coming to church and Sunday School; listen and learn from little on so you can grow up to be a faithful Christian man or woman, daddy or mommy, in church with your family.

If we choose the **one thing needful**, sitting at Jesus' feet listening to Him, what will we get? God will serve us through His Word and Sacrament. His Word of law will condemn us as guilty of sin, and His gospel Word will forgive and strengthen us. By this, the Holy Spirit will work in our hearts and minds to grow in faith in God and love for our neighbor. Today, we get to be a Mary, growing in faith by hearing Jesus' Word. One thing is necessary; let us choose the good portion, and not let it be taken away from us! Amen.