**Sermon for Proper 11-C**

**Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Aiken, South Carolina**

07-20-25

Luke 10:38–42

*38Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. 39And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his teaching.* ***40But Martha was distracted with much serving****. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me****.****”*  ***41But the Lord answered her,******“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42but one thing is necessary****. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”*

Last week, we heard the story of the Good Samaritan; an illustration that Jesus used to open a certain lawyer’s eyes to the fact that it is only after we realize the fullness of God’s mercy toward us, that we can then turn, and be merciful to others.

Journeying on from that encounter with the lawyer, Jesus and his disciples arrive at a village, and are welcomed into the home of Martha and her sister, Mary.

This village is most likely Bethany, for this is where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus would later raise from the dead. Mary and Martha are his sisters. Scripture gives the impression that this family was very close to Jesus and his disciples.

This is borne out by the manner in which poor Martha, in her frustration from running around, making sure that everyone was comfortable and had everything that they needed, comes up to Jesus, while he’s right in the middle of teaching, and says *“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.”*

Here, Martha demonstrated that family-like closeness, that familiarity, of being so relaxed and comfortable with her guests, that she doesn’t cautiously approach Jesus and say “I beg your pardon…”

Nor does Martha try to discreetly signal her sister, or whisper in her ear to get up and help her. No; Martha stomps right up to Jesus, and she lets loose.

To paraphrase Martha; [ Don’t you care that I’ve been running around here, all by myself, waiting on you guys hand and foot, while my sister just sits there? Tell Mary to get off her butt, and help me!]

Jesus, with perfect understanding and gentleness, addresses Martha’s frustration; **“***Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, 42but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”*

The Greek could be translated more literally; “Martha, Martha, you are *pulled apart* and *in tumult* regarding many things, but one thing is *required*; Mary has chosen the good part, which will not be taken away from her.”

How often does life find you pulled apart and in tumult regarding many things?

In this fallen, broken world, there is no lack of needs to keep us all very busy. There are those needs closest to us; our families; the kids; the aging parents; our friends; our church, and our church family; maintaining our homes and vehicles; our finances; our jobs.

On top of all that, we see all of the other needs in the world around us; the effects of natural and manmade disasters; floods; wars; poverty; addiction. What can one do; where does one even start?

We are pulled in many directions, pulled apart and in tumult, over many things.

We might be, like Martha, busy with much serving, and perhaps growing frustrated, because no one else seems to lift a finger. We may ask “Does no one else even care?”

On the other hand, we may be in a chapter of our life where we cannot do many of the things that we used to. We cannot serve like we once did, and we’re haunted by the feeling that we have become useless.

Whether our daily planner is packed full, or quite empty, or somewhere in between, our Gospel text brings to us a better understanding, a proper understanding, of service, and serving, and of what is truly needful.

Here, we have Martha and Mary; two devout, faithful women. They were two of Jesus’ disciples. Martha obviously is given to hospitality. She’s all about serving; she’s going to make sure that people in her house are taken care of.

Jesus does not criticize her serving; but, he gently reminds Martha that, apart from the right motivation for service, we are only spinning our wheels, and burning ourselves out.

The source of true service is not found in our own busyness; it is found when we sit before the feet of Jesus, and hear his teaching.

Before we can truly serve our neighbor, we must first sit down, and let Jesus serve us. It is written; *Seek ye first the kingdom of God…* The words of Jesus are all about the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ words are the good news of the grace of God to all mankind through him. It is the proclamation that he has not come to be served, but to serve, even unto giving his life as the sacrifice that has set us free from our sin and its eternal penalty.

His word bears the Holy Spirit, who works within us faith in this promise that we are saved, our sins are forgiven, and we are God’s beloved children.

But what, then, about our service to God and man?

The Augsburg Confession Articles IV and VI teach rightly about our works;

Article IV: *Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith as righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [ 3:21-26; 4:5 ].*

Article VI: *Our churches teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruit [Galatians 5:22-23]. It is necessary to do good works commanded by God [Ephesians 2:10] because of God’s will. We should not rely on those works to merit justification before God.*

*The forgiveness of sins and justification is received through faith. The voice of Christ testifies, “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty” (Luke 17:10). The Fathers teach the same thing. Ambrose says, “It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved, freely receiving forgiveness of sins, without works, through faith alone.”*

What have the Lutheran reformers articulated in these articles? That the one thing needful is faith in the service that Jesus Christ has rendered to us, so that we know and believe that we are forgiven, and stand righteous before God. Faith alone possesses this treasure, and Jesus promises that it will not be taken from us.

Mary in our Gospel text has found that one necessary thing that gives our lives, at all stages, hope and meaning, and makes all of our acts done in this faith good works.

Let Jesus serve you, and service to your neighbor comes naturally, as you simply live out your life. The Lord uses you in ways of which you are not even aware; your life is hidden in Christ, and wherever you are, there he is, using you for his purposes.

We need not fret over questions like “What must I be doing to serve the Lord?” You already are.

Rather than torment ourselves, questioning whether we’ve done enough or done it properly, or fixating on the memories of our screw-ups and shortcomings, we instead remember that our very imperfect lives are hidden in the completely perfect life of Christ, and that our sins have been completely washed away by his blood.

Even when you may be feeling pretty useless, rest assured that God is still using you and your life in ways beyond your understanding; and you are precious, and priceless, before the face of God.

You and I, and all whose faith is in Jesus Christ and his saving work for us are a royal priesthood, interceding for each other, and the world around us, with our prayers. This alone is a great service, and a good and faithful work.

Whenever we speak to God, he hears, and he answers, according to his will and wisdom, which is always good. Who can put a price on the prayers rendered by the saints of the Lord? Such service is priceless.

A lawyer once asked Jesus “Who is my neighbor.” Meanwhile, Martha was distracted with much serving. These are really two aspects of the same theme.

We cannot truly serve, and nothing that we do is a good work, apart from faith. True service begins with, and is rooted in, sitting down at the feet of Jesus, and letting him serve us.

Therefore, rest in his salvation, and don’t worry about the amount or the quality of your service in this life.

As you simply live your life in faith, the Lord himself is actually guiding and using you in his service, the Spirit moving you both to and through those works that he’s prepared beforehand for you to do.

To him alone be all glory. Amen.