

“The One Thing Needed”

I. I’ve always felt kind of sorry for Martha. Here she was, serving her Lord, and what does she end up with? A scolding. A gentle scolding. But a scolding just the same.

All she was doing was trying to do the same thing Abraham had done in the First Reading. Showing her love and respect for the Lord by being a generous hostess. Opening her home and kitchen to make sure He was well taken care of. Like my Italian mother-in-law, I’m sure she couldn’t be content to make certain there was enough food. There had to be more than enough. As the unwritten rule goes: “unless you have twice as much as anyone can eat, you haven’t been a good host”.

And we need “Marthas”, don’t we? How many times have we wished out loud we had a few more of them (or their male counterparts like Abraham)? When it comes time for staffing VBS, or filling out the choir, or serving on the Church Council, or preparing meals for Manna, or cleaning up afterwards; or caring, planning and providing in the many ways God’s kingdom requires.

II. Yes, it’s always great to have lots of Marthas and Abrahams—but at the same time we need to recognize full well their flaws, which, to one degree or another, are probably common to us all. For one thing, it’s possible that in her service Martha may have been doing a bit of grandstanding. I sometimes get the sense from what she says, and how the Lord responds, that what she was doing was being done, at least a little bit, to catch His attention, to be noticed for it, and maybe even to get some credit.

And that can happen, can’t it? It can happen to the point where (perhaps, without even noticing), we are actually trying to earn brownie points with God. To somehow earn His favour, so that He might say, “My, aren’t you being a good boy or girl; just the kind of person who deserves to be in My heaven!”

I know we Lutheran Christians ought to know better, but it's such an easy trap for our sinful flesh to fall into. Even though our theological heritage centers on the truth that we are justified by God's grace for Christ's sake through faith, we all tend to be at least a little needy for attention and approval. And, when it happens, we need hear our Lord's admonition from the Sermon on the Mount: "*Sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do . . . that they may be praised by others . . . Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward*" (Matthew 6:2). It's good to be reminded that what we do for the Lord we do for the Lord purely out of love, not for the cameras!

But not only might Martha have been doing some of that, but she compounded the problem by trying to make her service count more by comparing herself with her sister—"*Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve all alone? Tell her then to help me!*" And that happens, too, doesn't it? Even if we don't say it out loud like she did, we have the temptation to look down our noses at others who don't do as much as we do, or don't do it the way we would do it. Can't you see how much I'm doing for you, Lord! A lot more than her, anyway!" "Boy, if I were to do that job I could do it a lot better than that!"

But it's interesting that we don't hear Mary shoot back: "Oh, yeah! Well I listened better than you did!" It's also interesting that in the Second Reading, St. Paul doesn't take the same track either; instead of boasting: "I've suffered more than you have," he says: "*I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake . . .*"

But, I think Martha's biggest problem, the problem that probably underlies all of them, is that in saying what she said, she reveals how she was, as St. Luke notes, being "*distracted with much serving*". In the New Testament era, that word for "distracted" is also used to describe those who are even "dragged away" from the faith. The Scriptures are filled with examples of those who are pulled away from the Lord and from His mission. Like the seed sown on the thorny soil, it can be choked out by life's worries, riches and pleasures (Luke 8:14). Even service offered to the Lord and others, if it gets in the way of hearing and believing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, can become something that gets in the way of our relationship with

Him.

III. To put it simply: hearing and listening to what the Lord has to say to us needs to come before our serving. Just go back to the First Lesson from Genesis again. The reason it's included in the biblical record isn't just as an example of Abraham's hospitality to the Lord and the two angels (although it does do that). It's there because of what the Lord had to say when He came to him: because of His word of promise, because of His plan to provide the blessing of salvation not only to Abraham, but through His ultimate descendent, Jesus, to bring salvation to the whole wide world.

The same goes in the Second Lesson from Colossians. Even though we are by nature alienated from God and His enemies, St. Paul reminds us that our Lord Jesus has come to reconcile us with God. By offering His own body to death, He has freed us from accusation and condemnation. He has made us holy and blameless in the eyes of our heavenly Father; a mystery revealed to us so that we can proclaim it to the world around us.

That's what we need to hear and nourish our souls upon. That, more than all the scrumptious dishes Martha might have put on the table for Jesus. God's free gift of forgiveness in Jesus is the main course He has prepared for us to feast upon.

Biblical scholar Fred Danker once said, "Martha made the mistake of thinking that she was the host and Jesus the guest."¹ Even when our Lord Jesus is guest, He is the host. As I was saying to the children earlier, He is the giver of all good things. He is the maker and fulfillment of promises. He and His Gospel Word is the "*one thing necessary*". As Mary discovered in her listening, all the other good things, as good and wonderful as they are, cannot compare what we receive sitting at Jesus' feet.

Serving is important. But unless it comes in response to the receiving of God's gifts, then it very well may become something that brings honour and attention to us, but doesn't end up pointing to the Christ whom we say we are committed to serve. Our Lutheran Confessions

¹ F. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, p. 133, quoted in Arthur. Just, *Luke*, p. 459.

affirm that the hearing of faith is the highest form of worship². Faith that trusts alone in Jesus and His service for us by the cross and by the empty tomb.

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IV. Poor Martha. I have a lot of sympathy with her because I find it so easy to make the same mistakes she did. Like her I try so hard to be right that I sometimes end up being wrong. But, thank God, I'm confident that the Lord didn't stop by serving up correction alone. As He has done with us today, I'm sure He spoke His admonition with a smile on His face, and then proceeded to share some of the very good news of His forgiveness, served with a large dollop of love. And, without a doubt, it was for her—and for each of us fallen creatures—that He went to the cross, willingly bearing our sin so He might present us “holy and blameless” now and on the Day of Judgment.

I would hope that Martha, and we along with her, aren't overly hurt by His correction, but take some time to sit with Mary at His feet and listen carefully to just how much He loves us. Our heavenly Father doesn't want the “Martha” in us to stop serving. He only wants us to be sure not to let anything—not even our service to Him—get in the way of what He has to offer us in Jesus, the Son of promise, the Seed of blessing sent through Abraham to reconcile us to God. He wants us to remember and cherish and keep listening to and trusting in that “one thing necessary,” the Word made flesh, who reveals Himself as the One who has come to us as the Servant who has laid down His life for us and continues to serve us through the end of the ages. Amen.

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² *Apology to the Augsburg Confession* IV, 154: “The woman came, believing that she should seek the forgiveness of sins from Christ. This is the highest way of worshipping Christ”. *Apology* IV, 228: “God wants us to believe Him and to accept blessings from Him; this He declares to be true worship”.