

Her frustration is increasing. So is her blood pressure. The more Martha struggles in preparing the meal, the more agitated she becomes with her sister. How can Mary just sit there while it's obvious that she is needed in the kitchen? But even more, how can Jesus justify what Mary is doing? He surely hears the clanking of the pans even if Mary has tuned it out. How insensitive of Him to distract Mary from the work that needs to be done.

Finally, she can take it no longer. Martha goes up to Jesus, "*Lord,*" she says, "*Do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me!*" What can He say except that she is correct? Her question calls for a Yes reply from Jesus. "Mary, your sister is right. You need to go help her with the meal."

But no! How shocking for Martha to hear the exact opposite. "*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.*"

I wish we were told what happened next. Did Martha, shamefaced, go back into the kitchen to finish the meal by herself? Did she, perhaps, reply to Jesus with a "Yeah, but...?" Or how about this, she had her eyes opened and she sat down next to Mary at Jesus' feet. Because Jesus is teaching here and now, the meal can wait.

I prefer the last one. And I do think it is the right one because Martha is a Christian woman who loves the Lord. She respects Him. She desires to honor Him. Her preparing of the meal for Him and His disciples is in itself evidence of this.

Martha is not a woman who always has better things to do than the hearing of the Word of God. At different times in the Gospels, we see her in the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. When her brother, Lazarus dies, she beautifully expresses her faith in Jesus. The problem is not with her heart, a sinful heart though it is. Faith lives there. The problem is with her head. She made an error in her thinking. Her choice to serve Jesus took priority over receiving what Jesus had to give.

Sometimes, even quite often, we have to decide not between right and wrong so much as between superior and inferior. What we do for Jesus is inferior. What Jesus gives to us is superior. It is "*the good portion*" as He puts it.

But I will admit that we tend to turn these around. If you ever go to a district or synodical church convention, there is a time that is set aside to honor, with much applause, the congregations and church members who have worked hard in serving the Lord. Yet no word of commendation is given, and no applause, to those who have faithfully sat, like Mary, at Jesus' feet. The impression is given that if we are not Martha's, but only Mary's, we do not deserve to be recognized. So, Jesus should have called Martha out of the kitchen and said, "Mary, let's give her a round of applause. She is working hard with her serving." This is how the story would have turned out had we written it. We also would have added, "And Mary, get in there now and do something to help your sister!"

We tend to see Martha as that servant who put his talents to work and was commended by Jesus: “*Well done, good and faithful servant!*” And we see Mary as that worthless, lazy servant who buried his talent in the ground, not even lifting a finger to do something. How we need to hear again and again Jesus’ words to Martha that Mary chose the “*one thing that is necessary.*”

A congregation that is filled with Martha’s, both the men and women, who are always choosing what is inferior to what is superior, will look impressive to the world, but not to God. The highest worship is not to give but to receive. And if we are so hell-bent on what we are doing to serve Jesus, we will be distracted from all that He has done and does to serve us. If our focus is on the meal in the kitchen, and not the meal on the altar for our forgiveness, we will eventually lower the Sacrament to a position inferior to the food that we prepare.

But you show me a congregation that is filled with Mary’s, both the men and women, who love, above all else, to sit at Jesus’ feet, who delight in reading the Scriptures at home and studying them on Sunday mornings, who always place, as superior, the gifts they receive in the Divine Service, and I will show you a congregation that is also active in serving. Because the faith that is nourished by the words of Jesus cannot help but be active in service to Him and to others.

Jesus is pleased when you, like Mary, come to worship to receive. Nothing pleases Him more. Because what He gives you is “*the good portion.*” The portion He purchased for you on the cross – forgiveness, life, and salvation.

He knows that, like Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. And so, He sets your heart at peace as you sit here at His feet. He assures you that all is well. It is well because you are forgiven. God is at peace with you for Jesus’ sake. Your sinful choices in life, He has forgiven. Your placing of what is inferior over what is superior, He has forgiven.

And it’s because Jesus stayed the course, not ever allowing the inferior to replace the superior. Not ever losing sight of the cross – of reaching it for you and for your salvation. Because, for you, that is “*the one thing that is necessary.*” Amen.