

**Luke 10:38-42**

What makes you happy? What gives you satisfaction and enjoyment in life? Relaxing with a good book? Playing a round of golf? Shopping? Watching an old movie? King David answers that question with the words of Psalm 27: “One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple.” Above all things, what David desired; what gave fulfillment to his life was to be in the Lord’s forgiving, gracious presence.

What about you? In today’s Gospel Jesus tells us that the thing for us, above all things, is to listen to Him and receive His life-giving Word. The story takes place in the home of Mary and Martha. These sisters also had a brother, Lazarus, who later died and was raised from the dead by Jesus. Mary and Martha loved the Lord. They believed that He was the Son of God, the Messiah, their Savior. And they gave evidence of their love. Martha welcomed Jesus into her home, and then she prepared a meal for Him to eat—much like Abraham did for the Lord in our Old Testament reading for today. Mary sat at Jesus’ feet listening as He taught.

Both sisters were doing their “one thing;” the thing that gave them joy and satisfaction in life. Martha, serving Jesus’ needs, and Mary, listening to His Word. We know this is their one thing because this is the same story in John 12 after Lazarus was raised. Martha was again serving dinner for Jesus, and there also, Mary was at His feet.

Now I ask you, is there anything wrong with this picture? Martha, preparing and serving a meal for the Lord; and Mary, listening to the Lord? I suppose it depends on your perspective. Some may say, “Yes, I see a problem here. Why was Mary so lazy? She should have been helping her sister who was struggling in the kitchen.” Others may say, “I see a problem, too. Martha should have been at Jesus’ feet with her sister listening to the words of Jesus. The meal could wait.”

What about Jesus’ perspective? Does He see a problem with this picture? And the answer is “no.” No, He does not. The only one there who sees a problem with this picture is Martha. She complains to Jesus that Mary should be in the kitchen with her, and we see that Jesus responds to her complaint with stern love: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.” But this was only said in response to Martha’s gripe.

Now what Jesus could have done, before Martha even spoke, was to get up, walk into the kitchen and say, “Martha, leave the meal for later; you really should be out here listening to the Word.” But He doesn’t do that. Why not? Because Martha is showing her love for the Lord. She is serving Him by preparing this meal. And why does she serve Him in this way? Because, like her sister, she too, believes His Word. Certainly she heard Jesus speak many times. Certainly she was regularly in church hearing there the Word of God. She may have even been listening with half-an-ear as she, in her home, was busy preparing the meal. Jesus does not get up to scold her for serving Him, but He does scold her, lovingly, when she tries to pull Mary away from His feet.

It is not that Mary was a Christian and Martha was not. They were both Christians. In John chapter 11, Martha confesses her faith beautifully with the words, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.” The difference between Mary and Martha is that Mary’s one thing was hearing Jesus’ Word, and Martha’s one thing was serving Jesus. This is not to say that this is all they did. As we’ve said, Martha also heard His Word as she did in John 11; and Mary also served the Lord as she did in John 12, anointing His feet with expensive perfume. But their one thing—the thing they enjoyed most, which gave them satisfaction and fulfillment was, for Martha, to serve the needs of her Lord; and for Mary, to listen to His Word.

What is your “one thing?” Some of you love to serve the Lord. You serve Him by ushering, greeting, counting the offering money, and gladly adding your money to the offering. You serve Him by serving at funerals, by visiting the shut-ins, by making quilts, and by keeping the church and kitchen clean. You serve by teaching children in Sunday School, by being an Elder, a trustee, a board member, a committee member. Many of you here do much to serve the Lord because you love Him.

But there are two things He teaches you and me with this story. And the one is—serving must not get in the way of listening. “I came,” He said, “not to be served, but to serve.” Let’s remember who the Host is, and who are the guests. Jesus did not bring us into His Church through Holy Baptism for us to be the hosts and hostesses. He always remains the Host, and we the guests. That’s what Martha was forgetting (and that’s what we often forget). She saw herself as the hostess in her home and Jesus as the guest. But really it was the other way around. Jesus came there to serve her.

And Jesus is here to serve us. He invites us as guests to His House to receive His life-giving Word because we poor sinners need what He gives. He invites us to His Table to receive His body and blood because apart from Him we are nothing. He doesn’t need us, but we need Him. We selfish, lazy sinners need His forgiveness, life, and salvation. And that’s what He gives us whenever we gather here around Him. It’s not wrong to serve Jesus. But what Jesus would have us remember is that we can only serve because we first receive. Serving flows from receiving. Receiving His Word in a grateful heart will produce the fruits of service in our life.

The second thing He would teach us is that we need to let the “Mary’s” remain at His feet. Like Martha we, too, get frustrated that so few members help out with all the work that needs to be done in the church. We, like her, feel like complaining to the Lord about those who sit in the pew but do not help in the “kitchen.” “Let them be,” says Jesus, as He said to Martha. When they’re ready to serve, they’ll serve. And as long as they are at the feet of Christ, they will grow in faith and love, and that love for Jesus will move them to serve in His Church.

Mary was not less of a Christian because she was only listening and not doing. Some of our members, like Mary, are regularly at the feet of Jesus here in the pew, but not very often serving in the “kitchen.” They are loved by Jesus as much as all our “Martha’s” are loved by Him. And because they love to sit here at His feet, you can be sure that they will serve Him as they are able to in their life.

Whether you are more like Mary or more like Martha, Jesus loves you and He forgives you. He forgives you when you gripe about what others are doing or not doing. He forgives you because He served you by dying for you on the cross. You “Mary’s,” stay at His feet. Keep hearing His Word. Keep receiving His body and blood for you. And learn from our “Martha’s” how to serve Him. You “Martha’s,” keep serving your Lord well. And serve Him because He first serves you; because He first loves you. Do not let your service to Him keep you from His Word and Sacrament. But rather, let His Word and Sacrament help you in your service to Him.

No matter what your one thing is, remember that Jesus’ one thing is to serve you...to forgive you...to give you life here in His Word. Amen.