

Luke 10:38-42

This story in Luke 10 is read in church every three years. This year we are in the Luke cycle of the 3-year series, and so this story is again in front of us. And we need to hear it every three years; in fact, every three months; for there isn't one of us who consistently and faithfully remains a "Mary" in our posture and attitude, but sooner or later we all tend to become a "Martha."

A congregation cannot long survive if most all of its members are Martha's. This sounds strange; even backwards, for Martha is the one who is busy serving the Lord. Mary isn't so much as lifting a finger to help her. And so we might well assume that a congregation will thrive and grow the more Martha's it has. Martha's, not Mary's, are the ones who are recognized. They are the ones who hold the congregation together. They get the work done. They are always on their feet moving from one thing to another. But a congregation that has mostly Martha's, contrary to what we might think, will become weaker over time and will eventually fail altogether.

Let's look at our text. Martha is using her hands and feet; Mary is using her ears. We're told that Martha is distracted with much serving. The meaning here is that she is being torn this way and that way. Mary, her sister, could help, but she's not. She may not care that Martha is left with all the work, but Martha knows that Jesus will care. So she does not approach Mary; she stands next to Jesus: "*Lord, You do care, do You not, that my sister has left me to serve alone?*" There is a time and a place for sitting at Jesus' feet, but now is not the time. Mary needs to get off her seat and get to work. Martha is so sure that she is in the right that she literally commands Jesus to command Mary to help her. Not "please," or "would You," but "*Tell her to help me!*"

As forceful as Martha is, Mary is just the opposite. She sits passively. Her hands are still. Her mouth is closed. She is not distracted by all the work that needs to be done. She is focused only upon Jesus. Since His mouth is open and speaking, her ears are open, but the rest of her is silent. It's not that Mary is looking for an excuse to get out of doing the work of serving. It's this: There is a time for doing work, but now is not the time; not when Jesus is using His mouth to teach.

It's not Mary who scolds Martha; it's Martha who scolds Mary. And it's still that way today. Martha's resent Mary's for not helping. When it comes time to fill the congregation's boards and committees, Martha's point their fingers at the Mary's and say, "Tell them to start carrying their weight around here!" It's hard to convince the Martha's that they are not in the right. If you want a job done, a Martha will do it. But don't ask a Martha to join a Bible Class; you will meet up with resistance every time.

All of us have the tendency to become Martha's. Not so much in working harder for the Lord, but in this: Being torn this way and that way with all the distractions in life, that sitting at Jesus' feet is the last thing on our mind. It's seen as being weak. Not being necessary. And not nearly as noble as using our hands and feet to serve.

Mary doesn't scold Martha, but Jesus does. Yet He does it with love. Not "Martha!" but "*Martha, Martha...*" A gentle scolding, yet scolding nonetheless. "*You are anxious and troubled about many things,*" He tells her. Anxious within and troubled without. All the cares of life have taken her out of a listening posture; out of a receiving attitude. Who has time to listen and receive when there's work to be done! This is Martha. And this is us.

Jesus does not say to Martha: “You are no Christian;” nor does He speak this way to us. He is gentle, but firm. “*One thing,*” He says, “*is necessary.*” When He is speaking; when His Word is being taught and preached, we are in the wrong for doing work, even if that work is good work and pleasing to God. The one thing necessary is not that thing on my mind that I have to get done. It’s what Jesus is giving us through His teaching and preaching. More necessary than what we do for Him is what Jesus does for us.

A congregation full of Martha’s may get the work done, but they will do it for the wrong reason. They will love to be recognized. They will want what they do to be known to others. They will become self-righteous over time, focusing more upon what they do and less upon what Jesus gives. A church full of Martha’s may keep the building going, but it will become an empty shell; not filled with eager hearts and listening ears, but with people engaged in being busy with little desire to sit at Jesus’ feet.

A congregation filled with Mary’s will thrive. Oh, they’ll get the work done too, but not at the expense of sitting at the feet of their Lord. Their priorities will be straight. The “one thing needful” will always come before everything else. Focusing intently upon what Jesus gives, they will then respond in faith. They will love. They will care. They will serve and work, not to be noticed, but to show love back to the Lord.

We, who have the sinful inclination to become a Martha, are being scolded by Jesus today. Yet, out of love. He sees us being torn this way and that way in life. He sees us being distracted by trying to pay the bills. He sees our anxious hearts and all that troubles us. Yet even the person with good health, and no money worries, will be distracted with life unless the one thing needful, which sets our hearts at peace, is the daily focus. The tougher life becomes, the more we need to sit at the feet of Jesus, but the less inclined we are to sit there.

Friend, Jesus took His seat on a cross. That was, for Him, the one thing needful to accomplish on your behalf. He let nothing distract Him. He would not allow Himself to be torn this way and that way, but He set His face toward Calvary. For you, He did this; to calm your anxious heart by removing the burden of your sin and guilt, to relieve your troubles by taking the sting out of death and giving you, in your Baptism, a seat with Him in heaven.

These great blessings are yours, not through your being a Martha to Him, but by sitting with Mary at Jesus’ feet. He speaks to you the words of life, and nothing can take this life away from you. He gives you a seat here at His feet, and those who sit now at His feet will have a seat with Jesus forever in heaven.

Jesus forgives His Mary’s and His Martha’s. He forgives you. The certainty is here in the Sacrament for you. His seat is always in the bread and wine on the altar. We have been too “Martha-like” - all of us. He invites you to approach His altar like Mary - focused upon your Savior, coming to receive. Both you and our congregation will be blessed. Amen.