

In the ✠ name of Jesus. Amen.

Today's Gospel text, I think, is pretty well known: the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha. What may not be as well known is that this story follows immediately after last Sunday's Gospel on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It was suggested to me last Sunday that Luke places this story here in his Gospel as a corrective to a wrong understanding of last week's parable—it's easy to fall into that: that the parable of the Good Samaritan is mostly law.

Reviewing that pericope briefly, recall: a lawyer came up to Jesus and asked Him, *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* *"What does the Law say?"* Jesus replies to him. *"Love God and love your neighbor,"* the lawyer responds. *"Good answer,"* Jesus said. *"So go and do it."* The lawyer wasn't done...he wanted to justify Himself. *"So, who is my neighbor?"* he asked. And Jesus told the parable: a man was traveling down from Jerusalem to Jericho who gets waylaid by robbers and is left to die. A priest passes him by; so does a Levite. But a Samaritan stops, binds his wounds, puts him on his own animal, and takes him to an inn to care for him. *"Who was the neighbor?"* *"The one who showed mercy."* *"You, go and do likewise."* And so often that is preached as *"You, be a good Samaritan. You, call upon your own inner fortitude and keep the law: love God and love your neighbor."*

Thus, this little encounter with Martha and Mary follows on the Good Samaritan's heels to correct this notion. In this text, Jesus visits Bethany, the village of Mary and Martha—yes, they are the same Mary and Martha who have a brother Lazarus who later dies and Jesus raises up. Martha invites Jesus into her home — very hospitable. But then she becomes all preoccupied with serving Jesus.

You can start to hear the corrective, can't you? It's not that serving Jesus is a bad thing. Who here wouldn't do the exact same thing, if Jesus came to your doorstep? Of course, we would.

The tension in the story comes in the contrast with Mary and Martha. Martha's sister Mary chose not to help Martha with the serving, and sat down at Jesus' feet to hear His teaching.

Martha becomes upset. *"Don't you care, Lord? Don't you care that my sister is being lazy and is not helping me?"* Martha even commands Jesus, *"Tell her to help me."*

Jesus doesn't react in anger to Martha at her presumption. Rather He offers a gentle corrective: *"Martha, Martha,"* He says tenderly. *"You're all worried and troubled about many things. There's really only one thing that's necessary. Martha, I came not to be served, but to serve. Come and receive first from me—*

*that's the good portion that Mary chose—feed on my teaching, and be strengthened for your service to others.”*

When it comes to Jesus, that's the order always, isn't it? Receive first and then give. *“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,”* Jesus teaches. You simply can't bear good fruit as branches of the true Vine, unless you abide in Him—remain attached to Him. *“Apart from Me you can do nothing!”* So also, when Jesus sent out the twelve in Matthew, he sent them out saying, *“You received without paying; give without pay.”* Receive first.

And even when St. Paul quotes Jesus, saying, *“It is more blessed to give than to receive,”* isn't it clear that the blessings of God must come first for the giver, before he is able to give? Therefore, that person is truly more blessed who has in order to give, and he is blessed in the giving, too, for in loving and serving our neighbor, we are truly loving and serving Jesus, and He will say to us, *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”* And if that's true of temporal things like silver and gold, food and clothing, how much more so for eternal things?

Which has implications for us today, for it is so easy to be Marthas, fretting and worrying about many things: *“food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.”*

And, Christian friends, the God who supplies these things even to evil people without prayer, will care for us. That's why Jesus says, *“I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on.”* Instead He says, *“seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”* In other words, *“there is one thing necessary. Like Mary, choose the good portion, and trust that these other things will be taken care of, too.”* And then from these blessings, we go forth to be a blessing to others, in service to them.

So it is, too, for things eternal. How easy it is for Martha people to be so preoccupied by the many things in life, that they neglect the Mary thing, the one needful thing: coming to church, hearing Jesus' word, hearing the word of the cross, of His sacrifice, of His blood shed for You, of Your forgiveness through faith in Him, being fed by His Sacrament, remembering your baptism daily in contrition and repentance, letting your requests be made known to God by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.

You want to sum all that up? Serving is good, showing mercy, loving your neighbors...but your one needful thing is Jesus, serving you, not being served by you. That's what Divine Service is all about: Jesus coming down to be with you, serving you. Indeed, we say with St. Paul, that everything else is loss and rubbish *“in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law [not even love], but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

And so we pray as we just sang: *“Through all my life’s pilgrimage, guard and uphold me, In loving forgiveness, O Jesus, enfold me. This one thing is needful; all others are vain—I count all but loss that I Christ may obtain.”* God grant it...

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.