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Jerico & Saude Parish – Mission Festival

Text: Luke 10:38-42

Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house.³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word.⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me."⁴¹ And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things.⁴² "But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ,

If you lose Jesus Christ and His Gospel, then you as a congregation, need not exist. If you lose Jesus, then this building, with your Sunday services, with your Sunday School and other programs, can be closed. That is, in summary, what it means if you lose what Jesus teaches when He speaks of the "one thing needful."

This truth, the fundamental confession of Jesus Christ and the Gospel, is not only for congregations, but for our work as a synod, and our work at Bethany Lutheran College. It is our motto, and its meaning is to permeate what we desire for the students who attend.

There are many good things that your families, community organizations, volunteers of all kinds, food banks, and so on – there are many good things that all of these are able to provide for the welfare of your children, other people in your community, and beyond the confines of your local area. Each of you in your various vocations, where God has put you, have many appropriate and God-pleasing avenues for helping others.

This same variety of avenues to provide for others is found at Bethany. Whether it be Administration, or Staff, or the Faculty in the variety of academic disciplines, there is a desire to help our students in the horizontal aspects of their lives. What does it mean to have academic integrity? Why should I care? How do I live with others in charity and compassion? How do I love my neighbor?

These are important questions. But their answers—how we live—do not make us right with God or keep us right with God. If questions and answers for this life, our earthly vocations, become primary at Bethany, then we are failing in our primary work. The horizontal aspect of our lives, with other people, with our students, do not make right or kept right with God. This is active righteousness, doing, loving your neighbor. A great and blessed work. It is something we desire students and ourselves to learn, to grow in. But it is not the "one thing."

Martha exemplifies this horizontal action toward others, human to human. Martha welcomed Jesus to her home. Martha, as a good hostess, directed her

attention to serving Jesus and the others in her home. This was a great gift of kindness that she showed Jesus. Yet she was admonished by Jesus when she complained about her sister Mary. "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore, tell her to help me."

This is an understandable reaction on the part of Martha. She thought that at that point in time, with Jesus as her guest, with serving needing to be done in a timely manner, that it was the most important thing. Surely Jesus will know this, agree with her, and direct Mary to help her. It seemed like the right thing to do.

But was it? What we learn in this short episode in the life of our Savior is not so much a distinction between what is right and wrong, but the distinction between primary and secondary things. Actions of love toward others, as Martha is showing here, are subordinate to the "one thing needful." That is what Jesus teaches Martha. Her actions which in and of themselves are good, have become ways by which she has been pulled away from what should come first. She is distracted with the 'other things,' and so has become worried and troubled. Her desire to act, as laudable as it might otherwise be, has been made primary for her, and in that way she has failed.

Mary is depicted here by St. Luke as passive. "Mary sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word." Mary is not giving, she is receiving. And for the Christian, this is primary. This is first. This is the 'one thing needful,' hearing Jesus, hearing His Word. This is what has been the heart of Bethany Lutheran College since its founding in 1927. It is what we pray we can retain in the challenges we face.

Passive righteousness is hard for us because we humans, due to our alienation from God, are driven by the need to act, the need to try and show God how worthy we are. It is finally a condition that the Law of God must break in us. No matter how dedicated we are, no matter how kind we are, no matter how charitable we are, these are not what will decide our eternal fate. Heaven and eternal life are not won by us, by our deeds, by the intensity of our desire to act. Heaven and eternal life are won by Jesus; they are then given as gifts to you. And how is that done? By sitting at His feet, hearing His word, and faith which trusts that Word. Passivity.

In his wonderful commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther gave this counsel which very much applies as we learn this distinction between Mary and Martha:

"Therefore I admonish you, especially those of you who are to become instructors of consciences, as well as each of you individually, that you exercise yourselves continually by study, by reading, by meditation and by prayer, so that in temptation you will be able to instruct consciences, both your own and others, and take them from the law to grace, from active righteous to passive righteousness, in short from Moses to Christ." (LW 26:10).

Do you see what is at stake here if we get the 'one thing needful' confused? If I, as a professor in my religions classes, speak to students on the topic of death, and seek to provide comfort for that uncomfortable truth of death, do I bring comfort by telling them what honest and well-mannered students they are, how they are such a

great class, and that such actions on their part serve to stave off the fear of death? If that is my focus, students' active righteousness, what am I actually doing? I am implicitly telling them not to rely on Jesus.

In the book "The Hammer of God," a required text in freshman religion, and one which many of you may be familiar with, there is an episode in the first part of the book where a young and inexperienced pastor tries to console a dying man. The young pastor tries to provide consolation by telling the dying man: 'Johannes, out of all the people in the village, you have certainly lived a virtuous life.' To which Johannes responds: 'God will not judge me by comparing me to the people of this town, but by His law.' Thankfully, a pious and well-catechized Christian woman also visited Johannes and gave him the comfort of God's Word of promise and forgiveness. She pointed him to Jesus, and away from himself. In that way, hearing the One Thing Needful, Johannes was given comfort as he died.

Let me repeat: Martha's actions, her desire to give to Jesus, are not wrong. But she has placed them where they do not belong. They have become distractions. They have prevented her from sitting at the feet of Jesus and receiving His Word, His teaching, His grace. Mary had chosen the good part, listening, receiving.

While a goal of Bethany is to provide a solid education that will enable students to be good and productive citizens, it is not the primary goal. Remember how I started the sermon: If you lose Jesus Christ and His Gospel, then there is no reason to exist, either as congregations here in northeast Iowa, nor as a Lutheran college in south central Minnesota. That is, in summary, what it means if you lose what Jesus teaches when He speaks of the "one thing needful."

It is about putting first things first. So as you look to this fall and the opportunities provided you to gather around God's Word, and as we teach students at Bethany Lutheran College, what is the point of it all? It is to direct you and our students to Jesus, to teach you and give you the Gospel: you are forgiven, through faith in Jesus Christ, God's Son, who lived, died, and rose again, for you.

We meet Mary and Martha later in Gospels. In John 11 we hear of them and the death of their brother Lazarus. A time of sorrow has fallen on their home. But now we see and hear of the fruit of Jesus' teaching, especially for Martha. Jesus will not give her hope because her brother was a kind man. No, but what will Jesus do? He will give hope by teaching who He is, and what He does. Jesus does the action for our salvation, He is the subject of the verbs.

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. ²⁶ "And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." (Jn. 11:25-27 NKJ)

Do you think that Martha believed 'the one thing needful?' Clearly she did. She makes that powerful confession which comes only from hearing and believing Jesus: 'You are the Christ, the Son of God.'

There you have the one thing needful: Jesus, Jesus for you. In Him you are forgiven, in Him you have resurrection hope, even now. That is the hope that permeates the life of your congregation and of your college. It is the hope that lies at very heart of what we desire to believe, to teach, to confess. It is here because you have Jesus, and His Word of grace.

It is my prayer that this 'one thing needful' continue to be your foundation, and that of our college. It is the bedrock of saving faith on which you may depend regardless of the storm winds of life. God grant it to you all, in Jesus' name. Amen. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.