

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI

Pastor Mark Gartner

Sermon for Pentecost 9 -- July 22nd and 25th, 2010

Luke 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered,

"You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Dear brothers and sisters who know the one thing needful. Amen

Anybody here stressed out? I know, that seems like a silly question, because who isn't stressed out these days. I don't know if people today are any more stressed out or anxious than a generation or two ago. But I do know there is an awful lot of talk about stress and burnout today that many people don't remember 20 or 30 or 50 years ago. Stress seems to be almost second nature for most people living today.

I've heard it expressed this way: Thirty years ago people were asking, "How can I get to heaven?" Today people are asking, "How can I get through this day?" We can make ourselves such busy people, can't we? And we can find things to worry about that our parents or grandparents never even knew existed, much less needed to be worried over. Maybe your life has become "time locked" and you just go from one activity to the next, with no time to think. Or maybe you are under great pressure at work or in school. Some of you are stressed out because of a shaky marriage or problems with your children, or with your parents, or with your wallet.

I don't believe the solution to stress lies in simply stopping all those things that keep us so busy. That may be part of it, true. Many people today are just flat-out over-committed. We have to realize, finally, that none of us is Superman or Superwoman. We can't have it all and do it all. But many of the things in our busy lives are important, and do have value. It's not so much that we need to stop everything that's making us so busy. It's rather a matter, I believe, of being able to put emphasis on the more important things in life.

We need to learn to deal not always with those things that seem so **urgent**, but rather with the things that are **important**. I think most of us here today can tell you from experience, that's the hardest thing in the world to do. But as redeemed people of God, with the precious gift of God's time on our hands, we need to learn to stop majoring in minors. We need to stop placing too much emphasis on things that, in the final analysis, are only of minor and temporary importance. Instead, we need to ask God to help us

Sermon Theme: Focus On The Most Important Thing!

- 1. While serving others is important**
- 2. Jesus serving us is the most important**

It has been said by many people, "I need an extra day every week, an extra week every month, and extra month every year to do everything I'd like to do. Well, for those of us who are always looking for more time there's good news — sort of. According to a study by the American Management Association you can work harder, play harder, and multitask your way into squeezing 31 hours of activity into a 24-hour day. No kidding, the study concluded that people can add almost 50 percent more activity to a typical day of 16 waking hours. How? The answer is through technology and multitasking. Thanks to computers, PDA's, Blackberries and iPhones you can get more done in less time.

That might seem like good news until you look at the price tag for busyness: hypertension, not enough sleep, and feeling overwhelmed. And feeling overwhelmed can be paralyzing! As Americans we need to relax more. But as Christians it's absolutely essential that we learn how to rest and relax properly. In the Old Testament God gave his people a day called *Shabbat*, "Rest." Except for the 1st Commandment, no other

command is repeated more often than to observe the Sabbath, the Day of Rest. By this, of course, God wasn't calling his people to make sleep or the spa priority #1. He was calling his people to make his Word and Sacraments priority #1. Our lives are productive and God-pleasing only after we receive spiritual rest through the word of forgiveness, spoken and attached to water and bread and wine. That's why today Jesus takes us along as he visits the home of Mary and Martha. He aims to make sure that his Word and Sacraments remain the most important thing

Our text puts the story before us, **"As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?'"** It has been said by more than one person, the Devil knows what he is doing. He uses some of the most subtle temptations to create the biggest problems. That seems to be the case with Martha as he uses her zeal as her weakness. So far, he hadn't succeeded in getting Martha to stop loving Jesus. When Jesus came to her home, she got busy preparing a meal and getting his room ready not just because that was her cultural obligation, but because she loved him. "Well," Satan thought, "If I can't extinguish your great love for Jesus, let's see if I can't turn your great love for him into a great wedge in between him. Let's have you flip those priorities around a bit and have you place a higher priority on your work for Jesus than on his work for you." So, Satan whispered in her ear, "Holy cow Martha, the Son of God is in your house! Get busy, girl! You've got way too much to just sit around like your lazy sister, Mary and listen to him. Save that for later. First things first."

What do you know? Satan's effort at turning Martha's greatest strength—her zeal to serve Christ—into her biggest weakness was succeeding. We can see it in how messy her life was becoming. Because God's Word had ceased being priority #1, her service for Christ went from being a joy to something that was making her angry and frustrated. Spiritually, she was starting to get so "dizzy" from looking at all the things on her to-do list that her trust in Jesus was becoming messed up. Picture it: Martha passes by Mary and Jesus as she makes her way from the kitchen to the room she's preparing for him. "Ahem!" "Ahem!" But Jesus just keeps talking and Mary just keeps listening. "This is so not fair. Could you be more inconsiderate?" Martha thinks. Finally, she has all she can take. She unleashes her frustration, not on her sister, but on her Savior. **"'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?'"** Translation: "Lord, don't you care that my sister is just sitting there doing nothing, while I'm here slaving for you?" Satan is jumping up and down in complete joy. With a small flip in priorities, he got Martha to view the most important thing as "nothing."

Among the greatest blessings God gives us as his children is giving us more good things to do than time to do them in. Every day we have a smorgasbord of ways to serve Jesus. We can put in an honest day's work, call the friend who's sick, help our kids with math and cart them to soccer practice. We can fix the leaky faucet, hug our loved one, and smile when we pull behind the person at the post office drive-through and they obviously waited until that moment to write the return address and fix the stamps on half a dozen letters!

We have so many good things to do. And that's why we need to constantly be sniffing for Satan's smelly plans. He is like a smelly lion who loves to pounce on and destroy whatever is good in our lives. And he's no dummy. He knows just how to do it. Like he did with Martha, he'll urge us to put all the good things we need to do ahead of the one thing we really need. And he's effective. There's the obvious stuff. Skipping church for Sunday morning golf; skipping personal devotions for my favorite show. There's the more sneaky stuff, where Satan doesn't distract us enough to keep us from church; but he distracts us from seeking God's Word on a regular basis throughout the week! He makes our to-do lists and our problems loom so large in our minds that we're consumed by these things throughout the week. We think mainly of them, and Christ's Word, practically speaking, as holding a lesser place in our lives. And so, sometimes our faith in Jesus ends up being distracted! We lose our minds when we see that most of our to-do list still needs to be done. We lose the power to say with joy, "Jesus I get to do this work for you." We lose confidence that Jesus cares about us when we're left licking our wounds from our fights with temptation and our efforts to do our best for him.

2. Jesus serving us is the most important

Now Martha was no doubt the one that most people would have said was the more responsible one. And after a time, Martha felt like she was the only one pulling her weight around the house. She got pretty fed up with the whole situation, so she went to Jesus to complain. **“Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?”** she blurted. **“Tell her to help me!”** She was obviously a little frazzled and stressed out at all the work that she felt rested on her shoulders alone. It’s not fair! She felt. Mary isn’t doing her fair share. Help me, Jesus, help me straighten her out!

I’m sure Jesus fully appreciated that she was doing all the work that day just for him, catering to his every need as she served him with her hospitality. I picture Jesus’ reply being spoken through a very loving and very understanding smile, as he said to her, **“Martha, dear, you’re fretting and fussing over all these things.”** Through those words I’m convinced Martha could also hear, Thank you for your spirit of loving service. But then Jesus had to gently correct her misplaced priorities, and point out that Mary, too, was serving him, but in a different way than Martha. He told Martha, **“But only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”**

Can’t you empathize with Martha here? She must have been a little shocked at being corrected by Jesus. Or maybe embarrassed? What was she supposed to do, let the casserole burn in the oven? Serve Jesus dinner on paper plates? I think that Martha’s actions in this story so well symbolize the active, busy world we live in today. It’s easy to feel that being busy with some task, any task, is of more value and greater importance than simple, quiet meditation, while sitting at Jesus’ feet and hearing his Word taught or preached.

Our world tends to value action much more than reflection. It’s hard for busy Americans to justify the time it takes to simply gather with fellow Christians and discuss God’s Word and his work in our lives. It’s easy to feel that being busy for the Lord is a higher calling than being quiet before him. Just look at our church activity calendar. How many of the activities in a given week or month are focused on sitting quietly at Jesus’ feet to learn, versus doing some kind of project, or having a meeting, or holding a social get-together? It’s not that there isn’t a need or a place for all these things. Just like there was a need to eat a meal when Jesus came into Martha’s home. The issue is timing and perspective, priorities and choices.

Our lives become too easily ruled by what some people have called the “tyranny of the urgent.” When there is something right in your face, screaming for your attention, it’s a little difficult to analyze whether or not that thing is truly important, or simply urgent. The phone rings, faxes are spit out of fax machines, emails fly back and forth, somebody taps you on the shoulder, and it’s a chore not to be drawn immediately into someone else’s emergency. The question for us becomes, can you step back from those urgent-seeming things long enough to focus on the main thing in life? Can we stop majoring in minors in order to give ourselves and our time to what is truly of major importance, what Jesus called the **“one thing needed”** in this life? That’s the question. God has given us time for everything we need in life. The tough part is getting the right balance, the proper perspective, so that you don’t crowd out the one necessary thing -- the quiet, reflective hearing of God’s saving message of life. That’s the one thing we need most. That’s the main thing.

If this story were all we knew of Martha and Mary we might think Mary had the better spirituality. But we can see from another incident, when their brother Lazarus later died, that Martha had indeed grown strong and deep in **“the one thing needed”**. When Jesus reached the home of the grieving sisters four days after Lazarus died, Martha was the one to rush to meet Jesus while Mary stayed in the house and cried. Martha trusted Jesus. power and his goodness. She said to him, **“I know even now that God will give you whatever you ask of him.”** She said, I know, not I think or I hope. I know. And she said to Jesus, even at this time of her grief, **“I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God who was to come into the world.”** What a confession of faith! The woman who was once flustered by last minute meal preparations had become one of the first to recognize and proclaim who Jesus really is. I can’t help but think that Jesus’ gentle correction of Martha that day in the kitchen and his emphasis on the number one priority in life changed her whole way of living, and helped her stop majoring in minors.

Maybe you’ve seen the same plaque I’ve seen, with two simple rules for living: Rule #1. Don’t sweat the small stuff. Rule #2. Everything is small stuff. And, you know, compared to the good news that God loves us in spite of our selfishness and sin, everything else in our lives is small stuff. The big stuff is that Jesus

forgives us freely and welcomes us into God's family, not because of all we do or how busy we are, but just because he is a good and loving God – that's the big stuff. Compared to hearing that beautiful good news everything else IS small stuff. It's all the minors. And if Jesus were here with us in person today, I think he'd say, Don't sweat the small stuff. Stop majoring in minors. Instead, focus on what is needed. Seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these other things will fall into place for you as well.

Martha wasn't a bad person. She just had her priorities mixed up for a while. And you and I know it happens to us as well. Let's let Jesus lead us to stop majoring in minors and get our minds and hearts back to the one thing we really need. Thankfully, Martha wasn't the only one Jesus loved too much to let Satan con. With the same deep love he had for Martha, Jesus calls us by name and leads us to make the one thing we need the most important thing in our lives. He tells us, "Forget about all the stuff that needs to be done and all the problems that need to be figured out. I have it all taken care of. Just sit there, relax, and listen, 'Every one of your deficiencies is covered with my all-sufficient life. Every good thing you've left undone has been done by me and every failed attempt to do what's right has been dipped in my cleansing blood. So, you are more than good enough for God. So what does that mean for us? We are to follow Mary's example: quietly listen to discover what is needed.

We must recognize the necessary importance of letting Jesus serve us with the Gospel. Again, he came **"not to be served, but to serve."** It is in worship where we are served with the Gospel regularly. It is in worship where we listen to him speak to us. We are reminded of our sin. We know that none of our labors can earn God's favor, but we hear that Jesus laid down his life to forgive our sin. It is also in worship where Jesus serves us himself at the Lord's Supper. He gives us his very body that was broken. He gives us his very blood that was shed. He gives us the intimate assurance that our sins are taken away and our home is in heaven. Here *he* serves, *he* labors, *he* works; we are served, we listen, we worship. We have been given the one thing that can never be taken away -- his Word of Truth. That's how we can get through this day in our busy lives. And that's how we will ultimately get to heaven some day.

It's easy for us to get worried and upset about lots of things, even important things, like how we're going to continue to carry out Jesus' ministry here at St. Luke's, in our Synod and throughout his Kingdom on this earth. That's a topic many of us here today are greatly concerned with. Will we be able to take advantage of all the opportunities God is giving us to confess his Gospel truth? And will he make us generous enough to support what we have undertaken to do with our generous offerings? Those are important questions. But through it all Jesus asks us to remember that only one thing is necessary. May God lead us to choose that one thing needed, hearing his precious good news of forgiveness and life, and it will never be taken away from you. And then all the other things in life, and in his kingdom, will fall into place as well. May God make that happen in your life and mine, and in our congregation as well, for Jesus' sake. Amen.