Sermon | Proper 11C

TEXT: Luke 10:38-42

July 17, 2016

Mary and Martha

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Dear saints of God,

*One thing’s needful, Lord this treasure, teach me highly to regard. All else, though it first give pleasure, is a yoke that presses hard.*

A yoke that presses hard. What yoke is pressing you hard today? What worries you today? Troubles you? Burdens you? What cares and concerns have you brought with you here, into this holy house?

You ever wake up in the morning, and the first thing you do, is run through the checklist of all the things you have to do that day? “I’ve got to get up. I’ve got to go to work. Take the kids to school. We’ve got band practice and sports practice and meetings after work. I’ve too go shopping, mow the lawn, pay the bills, help the kids with homework. All of this has to happen before my head can come back here and hit the pillow. Which is really where I want to be. All day. In bed.” You go through that checklist. What happens? And you’re immediately troubled. Immediately anxious. Immediately worried. “How am I going to get through this? Make it to the end of the day?”

You see, that’s what the cares of this life do. They burden us, stress us out, press us down, cause us to fret, fear, be anxious. The cares of this world are a *yoke that presses hard.* Think of a giant ox or animal under a huge weight. You ever feel that way?

We’ve got enough to worry about in our own lives. And then we turn on the news and find out, eighty more people have been killed in a terrorist attack in France. Not weeks after fifty people were killed in a nightclub in Orlando. And we wonder when this Satanic evil is ever going to stop. Terrorism causes us to worry. Will it come to our school? Affect our streets and neighborhoods? Will our kids be safe?

*A yoke that presses hard.* What is the yoke that presses you hard today? The concerns and cares of this life that trouble you, burden you? Cause you to be anxious, and to worry?

*One thing’s needful.* One thing, you need, more than anything else, right now. One thing. What is the one thing? The one thing needful, for you, dear Christian, is the Gospel. That, you have come here today with all your cares and worries and concerns. And I’m here today to invite you to lay them at the feet of Jesus. To lift up your eyes to the holy cross and behold your Savior, who died for you, shed his blood for you, gave his life as a ransom to save you from sin and death. Your sin is forgiven, your iniquity is covered, in a tidal wave of Christ’s blood. By baptism, you are clothed with Christ’s righteousness. So that, the Father looks at you, and sees his dearly beloved child. And there’s not going to be anything—none of the things that worry you today—that will separate you from his love. Terrorism will not separate you from his love. Sickness will not separate you from his love. Death will not separate you from his love. You will rise victorious over all these things when the risen and ascended Christ comes again for you. *We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*

That Word, and that Word alone, is the one thing needful. You see the cares of this life, have the effect of burdening you, stressing you out, pressing you down. But the Gospel has the opposite effect. That as you hear the Gospel, the good news of what Christ has done for you, lifts your eyes up above your concerns to Jesus, that burden is lifted off. And there, you find peace, you find joy. You find rest. You find comfort. For your heart. For your soul. For your conscience.

And in our Gospel text, seated at the feet of Jesus, that’s what Mary found: the one thing needful. *How were Mary’s thoughts devoted/ her eternal joy to find/ as intent each word she noted/ at her Savior’s feet reclined! All earthly concerns she forgot for her Lord/ and found her contentment in hearing his Word.*

But Martha was in the kitchen. And it’s not—here, we have to be careful—it’s not that what Martha was doing was in and of itself a bad thing. Martha wanted to serve Jesus. And that was in and of itself a very good thing, a very good and godly desire. Martha loved her Lord, believed in her Lord. We remember in the story of the Raising of Lazarus, how Martha said to Jesus, “If you would have been here, my brother wouldn’t have died,” in other words, she believed Jesus was the God who had power to save from sin and death. Martha was a person of faith. Her faith overflowed in a desire to love Jesus, do good works, for Jesus, and for her neighbor. That’s how it works for all of us Christians. Faith is always active in love. Martha was a person of faith. And her faith overflowed in a desire to love and serve Jesus.

But it’s like this. Imagine there was a lady in the congregation, who was also a person of faith. Who said, “I love this congregation, Christ’s people. I want to make dinner for every person here.” Would that be a in and of itself good and godly desire? Sure. I think we would all say “thank you.” So the lady goes into the fellowship hall. But imagine the lady starts cooking and preparing, during Church, the Divine Service. So even though she’s not far away, while all of us in here receiving the Gospel—the absolution, the readings, the sermon, the receiving of Jesus’ body and blood in the supper—while all of us in here are like Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus, receiving the one thing needful, the lady meanwhile is distracted by the busyness of much serving. And that would be a bad thing. And that was Martha.

Jesus is teaching in the living room. But Martha is in the kitchen, slaving away over her pots and pans. And she sees her sister Mary, not doing anything. Not helping, not serving. Just receiving. And she gets mad. She says to Jesus, “*Don’t you care, Lord, that my sister has left me in the kitchen all alone? Tell her to help me*.” And I think all of us would agree with Martha. That would be our knee jerk reaction. “Come on Mary, get up, help your sister.” But not Jesus. You see, because Jesus knows there is only one thing needful for every human being. And he’s not about to let the cares of this world pull Mary away from it. So he says, “*Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled by many things. One thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her*.”

Martha’s serving wasn’t in and of itself a bad thing. But it became a bad thing, when it distracted her from the one thing needful, the Gospel. And do you see how the burdens of this life, the cares of this world, caused her to be frustrated and angry, how it robbed her of her peace and rest? You see, that’s what the cares of this life do: they set us against our neighbor, so that we gripe, and complain, and fight against, and be in contention with our neighbor. The cares of this life destroy love.

Here is what Martha didn’t understand. Martha didn’t understand that Jesus didn’t need her to serve him. Martha needed Jesus to serve her. This is what he came to do, remember? *I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many.* **Jesus came, not to be the guest, but the host.** Jesus was the host and Martha was the guest. That’s what she didn’t understand. She had it backwards.

That’s how we have to think about Church, the Divine Service. Jesus is the host. We are the guests. Sometimes we talk about Church the wrong way. We talk about Church as an obligation, “This is what I have to do. Come to Church each week. That’s what God wants me to do for him.” That’s getting it backwards. We don’t come to Church, to do something for God, to serve God, or love God. We come to Church, because here, God is doing something for us. Here in the Divine Service, God delivers to us the promise of the forgiveness of sins through the preaching of the Gospel. And we simply receive it in faith. Faith—this is important too—faith is not a work. Faith isn’t something we do, or produce. It’s not as if, “God is giving you all these things. Your job is to believe in him.” No. Faith isn’t a work. Faith is simply the means by which we receive the gifts that God gives to us.

And if that’s kind of complicated, think of faith, picture faith, as the open hand, or the open mouth here, at the Holy Communion. Your open hand, open mouth isn’t doing anything but simply receiving what Jesus is putting there. Or think of faith, picture faith, as Mary sitting down at the feet of Jesus listening, just hearing, just letting those words wash over her in a wave of comfort, just like you’re doing right now. Faith receives the gift. And faith is the highest worship of God. The highest worship of God is not that we do something for God. The highest worship of God is to receive what God gives to us; not to serve God, but to have Jesus serve us with the one thing needful.

Last point. Remember the Parable of the Sower. Jesus tells this Parable, that a Sower goes out to sow some seed. And that seed is the Word of God which is being sown into the earth of our hearts. Jesus tells us there are three obstacles, three impediments, to that Word being sown in your hearts. The first is the birds which come and snatch the Word away; that’s the devil, robbing of us the word. The second is the rocks and the sun; the seed falls among rocky soil, isn’t able to take root, and so the sun scorches them. That’s persecution. But the third is the thorns. Remember what Jesus said the thorns were? This is Luke 8:14, “*As for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature*.”

Don’t let the cares of this life, and the busyness of this life, the threats of this life, pull you away, from the one thing needful. Don’t fall into the trap of believing that anything is more important, or valuable, or necessary, than this: hearing the Word of God. The Word that you receive here in the Divine Service, in your prayers, in your family devotions, in Bible Class, in Catechism. Don’t let anything rob you of the comfort that comes from receiving that Word, a comfort that unlocks you of your fears, unshackles you of your burdens, gives you peace and rest in the knowledge of your Savior, Christ Jesus. In him, his Word of Gospel, we have a yoke that is easy, and a burden that is light.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*