

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Tempe, AZ
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Chris Pflughoeft
Is it really the better part?

³⁸As they went on their way, Jesus came into a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who was sitting at the Lord's feet and was listening to his word. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted with all her serving. She came over and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." ⁴¹The Lord answered and told her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but one thing is needed. In fact, Mary has chosen that better part, which will not be taken away from her." – Luke 10:38-42 EHV

The young father holds his son in his arms for the first time. In his mind's eye, he sees all that life has in store for this baby. He sees his son taking his first steps. He sees him playing little league baseball. He sees him putting on his helmet for the homecoming football game. He sees him driving his first car. He sees that car leave the driveway to head off to the best college in the state. He sees him graduate from that school cum laude. He sees him step into the office for the first time. He sees him meet that special girl. He sees that girl walk down the aisle. He sees that girl come home with a baby of their own.

As the dad holds onto his newborn son, he sees a beautiful life and he believes that there is instore for this baby. As he imagines all these momentous times, he could recognize all the hard work that his son needs to put in. He sees the late-night studying. He sees the bats swung and balls thrown. He sees the hours worked to have a money for the date. He sees the care that he provides for his bride with child. This is a beautiful life that his son will have, but the young father knows that his son will need to work hard like he did.

As we look forward to this newborn son's life along with his dad, I want to ask you something. Isn't this all we could ever ask for our children? A beautiful life... a good life... a life he worked for... a life he loved... A beautiful life...

That dad missed something though, didn't he? The dad missed something as he imagined a beautiful life for his children. It is something that many in our society, many of us, miss as well. Do you know what that dad didn't see in his mind's eye? He didn't see his son being brought to the baptismal font. He didn't see his son sitting in Sunday School. He didn't see

the family doing a devotion around the table. He didn't see his son professing his faith at confirmation. He didn't see his son coming to the altar to receive the Lord's Supper.

In today's gospel, Jesus talks about Mary and Martha. Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his Word. Martha was busy serving and preparing the home. At this moment, Mary valued her connection to Jesus through his Word and teaching. At this moment, Martha prioritized work and doing. During this lesson, Jesus upheld Mary's choice to focus on his Word. Jesus said that Mary had chosen the better part. Based on our experiences and thoughts, I need to wonder though: Is it really the better part? Since I am speaking to a room full of Christians, I know that the easy answer would be something like, "Of course, Jesus was right. He is Jesus!" I am confident that you all agree with Jesus cognitively, but in practice... in reality... do we truly agree that Mary had chosen the better part? Is it really the better part?

The reason that I ask this question is that I don't think it lives out in the lives of many. Do we actually agree that this is the better part? Just sitting and studying Jesus' word? Consider your schedule. Consider your priorities. Consider your history. Sure, God's word is important. But is it really the better part? To help us further consider this, let's go first to Jesus' interaction with Mary and Martha.

Luke provides this account not in chronological order, but rather in succession of thought progression. The previous lesson that he shared was the parable of the Good Samaritan. There Jesus taught a proper understanding of God's law. Now, he presents this interaction to teach a proper understanding of God's word.

As Luke presents this occasion, he wants the focus to be on Jesus' lesson. Therefore, he skips many of the details. He writes that Jesus was on a journey, and he entered a certain village. The village that Jesus entered was Bethany, the home of Mary and Martha.

In Luke's gospel, this is the first time that we meet these sisters. Those who are familiar with the narratives of the gospels would likely know these two. Mary and Martha were the sisters of Lazarus. Lazarus is a man that Jesus brought back from death. Mary and Martha were strong believers and followers of Jesus. That being said, Martha had her struggles too. She was a real person and a real follower of Jesus. Struggles and doubts are bound to happen.

On this occasion, Martha was working hard in the house to prepare the meal and make her house suitable for Jesus as their visitor. This makes sense, doesn't it? How would you

respond to Jesus being in your house? You would want to make it ready, right? You would want to serve him, right? That is exactly what Martha did.

As Martha served, Mary did something else. Mary was not helping at the moment. Instead, she was there listening to Jesus' teaching. This didn't seem right to Martha. Martha thought that Mary shouldn't just be sitting there listening to Jesus' teaching. So, Martha brought this to Jesus' attention.

I want to draw attention to Jesus' response to Martha. Jesus repeats her name twice. Jesus says, "Martha, Martha." This is not a scolding tone, but a tone of deep love. Jesus expressed this deep love for Martha. Jesus was concerned for her. Martha's tone demonstrated that she did not understand what was truly more important.

Therefore, Jesus told Martha what was truly important. Jesus told Martha that she was anxious and busy with many things. She was cleaning and prepping food. Mary was receiving what was truly necessary. Mary was receiving Jesus's Word. This was the better thing.

Jesus certainly asserts that receiving his Word is the better part. So, what makes this the better part? Well, think of the earthly preparation that Martha was doing. She was making food that would be eaten. She was cleaning a house that would be dirty again. She was taking time to make earthly preparations. As Martha came to make these earthly preparations, she was really misunderstanding Jesus' purpose. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. Martha failed to recognize that Jesus came to serve her. Martha failed to see Jesus wanted to prepare her. Then in her failure to truly understand, she wanted to pull Mary away from Jesus' word.

On the other hand, Mary went to Jesus to be served. Mary recognized that she needed to receive what Jesus gives. Not the other way around. As Martha served, Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and received his life-giving word. Martha made earthly preparations, but Mary made eternal preparations. Sitting at the feet of Jesus and receiving his Word that prepares you for life and eternity truly is the better part.

When people receive Jesus' Word, they receive something that is powerful. When people receive Jesus' Word, they are strengthened. The Word of our God is special and has greater power than the many things in this life. Receiving the Word of our God is the utmost need for humanity. We need it more than we even need food. Think of what Jesus once said,

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God.”
(Matthew 4:4)

Jesus said that Mary chose the better part. Brothers and sisters, have you chosen the better part? Are you a devoted disciple of Jesus' Word? The fact that you are here on a Sunday morning is an indication that to an extent you are. On a regular basis, I see many of you come to church to hear sermons which exposit God's Word. Many of you attend Sunday School, Christian schools, and Bible studies to dig deeper into God's Word. Many of you study God's Word at home through personal devotions. To an extent, you hear what Jesus' says about choosing the better part. Then, led by the Holy Spirit, you live this out. You choose to regularly be in the Word. You choose to connect your children to the Word. By the Spirit's power, you follow the path of Mary. You recognize the one thing that is needful.

Although in some important and formal ways, you demonstrate that you too choose the better part, is this truly lived out daily? There are 168 hours in a week. If you attend Bible study every week and worship, that will make you appear to be a very faithful student of the word. Yet, that could mean that potentially only 2% of your time is focused on God's Word. Now, some of you would be like me in which most of your time is focused on God's Word. Perhaps you are engaged in a ministry... you are engaged in personal study... literally, most of your time is in God's Word. But you and I can say it isn't really a time issue. The issue isn't really about how much time we put into God's Word. The issue is a priority. Do we value it? Although putting much time into God's Word can demonstrate value, it isn't the only thing to consider. Consider how you set your priorities regarding God's Word and life. Maybe we can be a little more Martha than Mary. Let's consider some scenarios.

Imagine a pastor who spends 60 hours a week engaged in the work of the church. He preaches. He teaches. He counsels people. Yet, he is so busy. He uses God's Word as a tool for his job. He gets so much done, but does he truly meditate upon God's Word? Maybe that pastor is a little more Martha than Mary.

Imagine a child who sits through Christian school. She has the opportunity to listen to God's Word on a daily basis. She is receiving a wonderful education that is intended for Christian formation, but she just doesn't care about what the Word says. Her words and actions don't align with God's law. Her spirit doesn't align with God's heart. She is connected to the Word, but she doesn't seem to value it. She may not look like Martha, but her heart isn't like Mary's either.

Imagine a family who is connected to a church, but the priorities of life constantly pull them away from truly spending time in God's Word. They are busy doing many things, but they tend to miss what is truly needful. Between extracurriculars, trips, and work, they are busy doing good things, but they are missing the better part. That family would seem to be more like Martha.

Mary certainly is not a perfect example, but Jesus says she had chosen the better part. Brothers and sister, let us heed Jesus' message to Martha. Our priorities and attitude have been off. We have failed to properly value God's Word. We have chosen many other things over being in God's Word and deeply studying it. Let us confess this sin to the Lord. When you go to God's Word, I am not asking you to do something. I am asking you to go receive some rest. That is what God gives you through his Word. He gives you rest for your soul. You receive rest for now and eternity. Through the Word, you are strengthened to know that you are God's. This Word proclaims that your sins are forgiven. This Word proclaims what Jesus has done for you. Jesus lived, died, and rose for you. Receive this wonderful rest from Jesus in his Word.

The eternal rest is why you want to make this Word a priority. The reason the Word is the better part is because it will lead you to paradise. That is so much better than all the other good things this world may offer you. Listen to Jesus' Word. He has given you the better part. Amen.