THE ONE THING NECESSARY

1. It not being busy serving him
2. It is choosing to sit and hear the Word of the Lord

If you had to decide on the one thing necessary for your life, for your well-being, what would it be? Would it be money or having the right medicine, a good marriage or family life? A couple of months ago we saw how many people acted as though the one thing necessary for life was money. The lottery had grown to an astronomical amount and people from all over were going crazy trying to buy tickets. But is winning the big lottery necessary for having a good life? Is having money the one thing necessary?

In our reading Jesus wants us to know that there is one thing necessary for our souls. As we catch up to Jesus in the last 6 months of his life, he has resolutely set his course for his final visit to Jerusalem and the cross. The date for this visit with Mary and Martha was during one of the Jewish Feasts. We are not sure which feast it was but we can see that Mary and Martha would have been quite busy preparing the feasts and amenities that would accompany such an occasion.

Luke records this visit to Mary and Martha following Jesus' teaching about the Good Samaritan that you heard last week. There is a lesson in the contrast between the Good Samaritan and Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha. God wants us to be doers of his Word; yet he also wants us to be hearers of his Word. While God wants us to be Good Samaritans doing good to those in need, God also wants us to know that the one thing needful in life is to hear the Word of God. Hearing the Word is more important than good health, money, security or even a good family life and it is more important than being busy doing good deeds. This account shows us that the one thing necessary is the better thing. It is not being busy serving him, rather, it is choosing to sit and hear the Word of the Lord!

As we listen to Luke’s account, we can easily imagine the scene of this dinner because we have probably all seen it before. A big family get together occurs and there is so much to do. Someone has to clean, prepare the food, set the tables and then serve the meal. Doesn't it often happen that the work falls on a few while most of the family act as if they were guests and do not have to lift a finger?

It is not just big family gatherings either. Sometimes it seems that a few do all the work even in a congregation. When the few do all the work, it is easy to understand their response, like Martha’s, why don’t they help. And then, we can get so irritated that others are not helping that we fail to enjoy the time. But Jesus is not teaching us here to all join in and help with the work at hand. Here he is teaching us that there is something more important than labor in the church.

Martha, the older sister, was upset and who could blame her. When Jesus arrived, she stopped what she was doing. Now it looked like all Mary was doing nothing but sitting down enjoying the Lord's company and listening to him and Martha had been stuck with all the work! Martha began to grumble and got so worked up over this that she was not enjoying the work of serving Jesus. She was so distracted by her feelings of having the workload dumped on her that she was not even listening to what Jesus had to say. She even seems to be blaming Jesus when she said: Lord, don’t you care
that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?

Have you ever been there? Have you ever been so preoccupied and stressed with what you thought you had to do, that you simply missed out on what was happening? Have you found yourself so preoccupied with what you were going to cook for dinner on a Sunday afternoon, or how the football game was going to go, or even what you had to do to help get a dinner ready at church, that you did not hear the sermon? Or leave service early because you have to get coffee ready for a potluck or fix lunch for company that is coming or beat the traffic rush at restaurant or game?

Martha was not wrong in wanting to serve Jesus. He tells us to serve him with in all we do. We are to give glory to God in all we do. We are to serve him with all our hearts and minds. He had just finished telling about the Good Samaritan which teaches us to serve our fellow man by helping our neighbors, that is, anyone in need. The last commandment Jesus gives to us is to serve him by spreading the Gospel and making disciples of all nations.

Martha fell into sin here, not because she wanted to serve Jesus, but because in her service, she got her priorities mixed up. First and foremost God tells us again and again that he wants us to take him at his Word, to believe in him. He does not want service performed simply out of a sense of duty or out of the idea that we just have to do it. Rather, he wants us to act out of faith.

Does Martha's reaction strike a chord within you? You and I could easily play the role of Martha, always rushing around, doing this and that, pick up kids, church work, so busy that we get distracted and do not pay attention to the one thing necessary. Perhaps life's sorrows or pains have so overwhelmed you that you have forgotten to simply listen. Jesus taught us the one thing necessary and it is not being busy with the work of service or with life itself. Rather it is choosing to sit and hear the Word of the Lord! This means to take time out to sit and hear the Word.

It is significant that Jesus observed that, in sitting at his feet, Mary had made a decision - she choose to sit and hear the Word, rather than to be distracted from the business of service. Mary did not choose to dump all the work on Martha. What she chose was to feed her soul with the Words of Christ. God tells us that our faith comes from being fed the Word.

The need to have strong faith based on the Word would be dramatically demonstrated to these two sisters about 6 months later. These women were the sisters of Lazarus, the man whom Jesus raised from the dead in the week before Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly on the way to the Cross the following Friday. At that time, both women were distraught over the death of their brother. They both told Jesus that had he been present, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus said to them:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? In other words, Jesus asked them: Do you believe what I say?

Paul plainly tells us that no one can believe what they have not heard. Paul sums up the necessity of hearing the Word in Romans 10: Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they
Jesus commended Mary's decision to take time out from her busy life and all the preparations to sit and hear, to listen to him. Her need to serve had been surpassed by a need to sit - sit at Jesus' feet and listen to his Word. She realized that Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. And nothing was going to distract her from hearing the message of life from her Lord's lips. Mary had chosen what was better – sitting and listening to the Word of God. Mary had her priorities straight.

Jesus invites you and me to set our priorities in order. He does not excuse us from service. He simply reminds us that service is not necessary for our souls. What is necessary is to feed our souls with the Word. He invites us to follow Mary, to take the time to sit and hear his Word. But that means you and I have to decide that our priority is to sit and listen to his Word, at home, in private devotions, family devotions and at church. Jesus wants us to sit and listen because it is the better thing for us and for our loved ones.

In essence, Jesus told Martha that all else can go by the way side. It did not matter if the food was served just in the right way at the right temperature. It does not matter if our lawns are in perfect order and our houses are cleaned just so. The time to worry about those things is past. What we need to do is take the time to hear. This does not mean that we never work or that it is acceptable to leave the work to others in a selfish decision to take it easy. What it means is that we work when needed, but never to the point of distraction so that we do not hear.

This is the better thing for us and for our families because it builds up our faith now and for all eternity. Jesus told Martha that this was the better thing and it would not be taken from Mary. In other words, the desire to hear his Word, to listen to him, would not be taken from Mary and neither would the benefit be taken from her. It would not be taken from her to benefit Martha's misplaced efforts to serve. It would not be taken from her because it was the one thing necessary.

Someone won the huge lottery prize a while back. All that money, more than most could spend in a lifetime, cannot buy the one thing necessary, for life, for God offers the one thing necessary, free of charge to us. He offers us his Word, the Word that gives birth and sustenance to our souls. In this life there is the one thing necessary. It is not money or the things money can buy. It is not being busy serving him. It is choosing to sit and hear the Word of the Lord. So make time to be like Mary, to sit down at Jesus' feet, to listen to the one thing needful. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill