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~ Luke 10:38-42 ~

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Let us Pray:

Lord, send your Holy Spirit to lead us to truth

For if She is with us then nothing else matters

And if She is not

Then nothing else matters

Amen.

If you are like me, this well-known and often misused scripture, is, at best, frustrating and at worst dangerously misleading.

I sometimes picture Martha and the elder brother from the parable of the prodigal son, meeting somewhere for coffee after their respective encounters, looking at each other with a “can you believe that?!” expression on their face as they sit down to commiserate together.

We all get it...

“...the Son of Man you have with you only for a time...” best to listen and learn, not to waste time with anything else even if those things are the most practical and necessary things to be doing in the moment...we get it!

But...

Would it not have been enough for Jesus to have called out to Martha... “Martha, don’t worry about those dishes right now, I have something really important to tell you”?

Instead, the embarrassing, albeit gentle upbraiding of the more diligent of the two sisters creates a problematic duality that the Church has wrestled with since the very day it happened.

How much do we **do** and how much do we just **be**?

Should our encounter with the living God in Christ Jesus necessitate action or is it enough to have heard the Good News and simply have believed it?

As it is so often, in the case of Jesus, the answer to these questions is **YES!**

We know that we are to *let our light shine before others, that they may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)*

We know that we are *God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. (Ephesians 2:10)*

We instinctively know the answer to the question, *what good is it... if someone says he has faith but does not have works. (James 2:14)*

We are also well instructed, ironically most particularly in Luke’s own Gospel, about the sacred nature of **hospitality**.

It cannot be a simple coincidence that the very chapter in which Luke brings us the story of the sisters of Lazarus, starts with very specific instruction to the newly commissioned 70(2) disciples about hospitality, how they should expect it, how they should receive it, how they should reward it and how they should prophesy against those who refuse it.

It is also no coincidence that our meeting with Mary and Martha in Luke is immediately preceded by one of the most well-known of all the parables, both inside and out of the Church, that of the Good Samaritan.

One would have to look far indeed to find anyone who has not heard this tale, in some form, and who cannot identify the moral instruction it is providing.

We should love our neighbour, even when the world tries to tell us that they are our enemy, and we should evidence that love in right action and hospitality.

How then, even as Martha is manifesting the selfsame right action in her ministry of hospitality to the Lord Himself, is something still not quite complete.

I think this story is a bit like that old Buddhist koan “*what is the sound of one hand clapping...?*” What I mean is that I think the story is not asking us to choose one or the other sister’s example and hold it is the **right** one. I think we are meant to see the value in each sister’s reaction to Jesus in their midst and find the good in both. Yes, I know that Jesus

plainly says “...*Mary has chosen the better part...*” but each of the sisters already knows who the Lord is and instinctively understands what Jesus says when He says “...*there is need of only one thing...*” they know what He means, they know the one thing is **Him**.

Both of them are acknowledging the truth of this in the way that is most natural to each of them...for Mary it's to sit quietly and **receive** and for Martha it's to go about her work and to **give**.

And that is of the way of **grace** is it not? It's very much a two-way street, one cannot receive grace if they are incapable of giving it and can never fully give it, unless it first dwells within them.

Perhaps however, where Martha veers off the path, where she has trouble with the **receiving** part, for the briefest of moments we hope, is the same place where her coffee date, the elder brother of the prodigal son, does as well.

You see, as “*doers and not hearers only*” James 1:22 (Yes, I'm talking to you, Mary) the elder brother, and Martha get irritated when their siblings don't pitch in (or fail in their duty to their parent). There is a certain pride, and therefore the compromise of sin, in their placing a higher value on what they are doing and their judgment of others who are not doing enough.

I find that the response of Jesus to this attitude in Martha and the response of the father of the prodigal son to his eldest to be very similar in tone don't you?

“I love you...”

“You are doing good...”

“But your sibling is witnessing the resurrection...”

“Come and join them!”

I think we struggle with this in the Church mightily.

Where would we be without the Mattha's among us? Surely, we would have no liturgy, no bread for the eucharist, no place in which to worship, no order by which to exist as the body of Christ in the world, were it not for the faithful Mathas around us who show their love in **service** to we, their siblings and, through us, to the Lord Himself.

The issue, I think, is in the order of things, which is to say, what comes first?

As Christians, and especially as Lutherans, we know...we must know...that before all things is **GRACE**, a grace that is offered freely to all the earth. Works that are pleasing to God are born out of this grace, they never precede it, and they certainly never merit it.

All our most sacred things, the liturgy, the Eucharist, the Church itself, exist for the proclamation of the truth that we are loved and made whole by the God who brought us

into being, not for anything we **do** but simply for what and **who we are**... this is the free gift of God, it is nothing that we can earn, it is nothing we can add to or take away from, it is the work of our God in Jesus Christ and God's work alone.

Once we truly believe, which is to say **TRUST** this, then our service, the good works we offer in response to the needs of others, come out of a place of gratitude for something which was first given us, even though we did not merit it. Once we trust that we were first loved, our loving of others becomes, not a fearful and desperate attempt to earn that love, but rather a celebration of the truth of the Gospel for us and for all the world.

To do this, to trust that this is so, to allow yourself to simply **BE** in this truth, is to **choose the better part**... To let love and good works flow from it, as a result of it, is evidence of that trust and is, indeed, to the Glory of God

So, whether you be Mary or Martha...go in peace, first to **be**, and then also to **do** likewise.

Amen.