

Pentecost 8 July 18, 2010 Luke 10:38-43 The Choice Between Two Goods

Show the video.

Someone has said that the American church is the Fad-Driven Church. Calling off church to do service projects seems to be one of those fads. What would you do if your church decided to cancel Divine Service and instead send everyone out into the community to do various service projects on Sunday morning?

Last Sunday Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate what it means to be neighbor to someone who is in need. That the Levite and the priest, both full time servants of God, did not come to the aid of the man who was left for dead, presents a strong contrast to the man who did come to his aid, the Good Samaritan. Our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to be active in ministering to those in need.

People want to make a difference. People like to be helpful. That is why churches and youth groups have found such joy in servant events in their communities and around the world. Habitat for Humanity has been so successful because of Christian people like you who obey God's command to love one's neighbor. Did you know that there are still opportunities to aid in Hurricane Katrina cleanup? There is no end to the need; and so there are opportunities galore for in your vocations and in special projects.

You have heard the phrase, "the choice between two evils." Today our Gospel reading, the story of Jesus' visit to the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany might be called "The Choice Between Two Goods." It follows right on the heels of the story of the Good Samaritan which tells us it is good to put our faith in action and be neighbor to one who is in need. It is also good to sit and listen to God's Word. As Solomon said in Ecclesiastes, "There is a time for everything." Jesus chides Martha for the good thing she was doing, while He commends Mary for choosing the one thing needful – sitting at the feet of Jesus – that's a figure of speech for listen and learning.

The news reporter in the video was absolutely correct when he said, "It's one thing to say the prayers, it's another thing to grab a saw." There is a great misconception in Christianity today that in order for the church to really be the church, we must recognize that there is something more important than coming to church, confessing our sins and receiving absolution, hearing God's word, prayer and Holy Communion. That one thing

better than worship is service. But just as the branch must always receive nourishment from the vine, or die, no matter how green and full of life it appears to be, so listening to the word of God is the one good thing that gives life to the church. The church is the church when she is confessing her sins, receiving absolution and Holy Communing, and when she sits at the feet of Jesus, listening to pastors teaching the word of God.

Martha's "many things" were not bad things. No, they were good things: showing Jesus hospitality and serving a great meal. Jesus taught His disciples to go where they were welcome. Martha was welcoming Jesus. This was a good thing.

But even good things can choke the Word of God as Jesus illustrated in the parable of the sower. Martha was so concerned about all the things that she thought had to be done, that she was self-righteous toward her sister, Mary, and so Martha missed the blessing of having Jesus in her home. Jesus said Mary has chosen the one thing needful and this shall not be taken from her. Contrast this promise with the seed that is snatched by Satan; the word that is choked by the worries and cares of the world.

A Christian man quit going to church. He was upset because when he took over the Sunday School and got it going well, with new equipment, greater attendance, and excited teachers, all he ever heard from them was, "Come with us to church." He thought more of them should have helped him or at least they should have been more thankful for what he did, but instead they wanted him to sit around and hear God's Word. Of course he was missing the whole point.

Martha had forgotten who the real Servant is. She thought she was the host and Jesus was the guest. When we begin to grumble and complain, resenting the fact that others are not helping and bearing their share of the work, and this may be true, then it's a sign that we have lost sight of that fact that Jesus has come to serve us, just as He said, "the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."

In college I worked at a Lutheran summer camp with Tim Heiney, a seminary student, who later became a missionary in Guinea. Tim observed on one of his furloughs how much busier life seemed to be in the states. People are always rushing here and there with so much to do. People even rush about on vacations. People even boast about

how busy they are. Sounds like Martha doesn't it! In our rushing to do this and that, in the name of Christ, we often miss the peace is ours in Christ.

To the world Mary might even look lazy but Jesus commends her for choosing the one thing needful, sitting passively at His feet and listening. That was the best thing she could have done. Why did God give the command to observe the Sabbath Day? So that His people would remember who the real servant is: HIM, God, the Creator, and Deliverer.

To say "we're going to go out and be the church by doing service projects" rests on two assumptions: first, that going to church is not really being the church. The church is never being the church more than in Divine Service where we acknowledge Christ as the source of our salvation.

It also assumes that God's would have us chose good works over worship. James wrote, "Faith without works is dead!" But to substitute good works in place of our time spent in worship is assumes that worship is time we are giving to God. Our hymnal calls the order of worship, "Divine Service" for good reason. It's is God's service to us. We are not doing God a favor by giving Him an hour of our time each week. We come to church not so much to give God anything, but to receive from Him the forgiveness of our sins, eternal life, and salvation – things that are the fruit of our Lord's suffering, death and resurrection. Yes, we respond to His unsurpassing grace by singing His praises and serving our neighbor, but first things first. Unless we passively sit at the feet of Jesus and listen, let Him wash us in Holy Baptism, let Him take our sins away and give us His perfect righteousness, and let Him put His body and precious blood into our mouths , we are not His. Ps 145 puts it in the right order: "I will meditate on your wonderful works, and I will proclaim Your great deeds."

The Bible says, "Faith comes by hearing the Word of God," and "Without faith in it impossible to please God." Of the choice between two good things, the best thing is to be in the Lord's presence eager to receive what He longs to give – forgiveness, eternal life, peace, and salvation. It is good to serve our neighbor. It is good to let the Lord serve us in Divine Service. But never can one be substituted for the other. To say that God would not be displeased with me for substituting service for worship – I wouldn't be too sure of that. What do you think Jesus would say?