

Text -- Luke 10:38-42

Theme -- "The Good Portion"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are here today for worship. Worship. That's a good word. One that we hear and use all the time. But what exactly IS worship? I suppose most of us (if asked) would just shrug our shoulders and say: "this". That is, we probably would say that worship is "coming to church". But what is it about "coming to church" that is worship? So, you might dissect the service and mention its constituent parts, starting with the Invocation (when we call upon God's presence and power, as we remind ourselves that we come here as God's children). Or you might move on to the Confession/Absolution, where we plead guilty of all manner of sin and fall before God begging His mercy -- which we receive as the pastor speaks that word of forgiveness for Christ Himself. Or perhaps you might speak of the Kyrie, when we cry out: "Lord, have mercy!" Or you might mention the Introit, or the assigned Scripture lessons, or the sermon. Or some folks might think of confessing our faith, using the words of the Creed. Or lifting up together our prayers, for ourselves and others. Others will point to the Lord's Supper. Or maybe you would refer us to the hymns that we sing together, in praise of our Lord.

You see, the point is, worship embraces a LOT of things. And that is just what goes on during our weekly worship — not even mentioning our daily worship of God in prayers and devotions! So: what is worship? A good question. However, that question is not new, nor is the confusion over how to answer it. In fact, that question (what is worship?) really is behind our Gospel lesson today, the familiar story of Mary and Martha.

The lesson opens by telling us that Jesus and the Twelve were on their way. That is, JESUS is on His way. On His way to completing His mission as given Him by His Heavenly Father. To be our Savior. He started on that way by coming down from heaven, to be born of the Virgin Mary. He continued it by being baptized with our sin in the Jordan River, immersing Himself in the filth of our wickedness, letting our guilt wash over Him, sanctifying and purifying the water to be His instrument of cleansing us through our own baptism. The way of that mission took Him down countless dusty, dirty roads. To countless big towns and tiny villages. Full of countless sinners. All of whom wanted and needed things from Him. And so, we have the miracles: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, stilling storms, casting out demons, even raising the dead! And here, in our lesson today, He comes to *this* little village -- Bethany -- about an hour's walk outside of Jerusalem. He comes to the home of Mary and Martha (and their brother Lazarus). So how do these wonderful ladies receive Jesus? How do they treat Him? How do they worship Him?

Well, Martha, we are told, welcomed Him into her house. From the reading, it sounds as if she is the one who invited Jesus to come and visit, to stay with them for a while. She certainly recognized Jesus to be sent from God -- in fact, later on (when brother Lazarus is sick and dying), it is Martha who sends for Jesus to come and heal her brother. And when Lazarus dies and Jesus comes, it is Martha who calls Him "Lord" and suggests that Jesus could STILL do something for her brother. My point is that Martha confesses Jesus: He is her Lord, her Savior. She looks to Him for help, for hope, for life. Her faith in Jesus is no different in that sense than that of her sister, Mary.

So, how does Martha see worship? Well, that comes through loud and clear in her actions. We are told that she was quite busy with all sorts of preparations and services for Jesus. She wants to give Him the best. To make sure He is comfortable and well-cared for, loved and thanked. And so, she DOES. Lots and lots of stuff. So much, in fact, that she becomes (in St.

Luke's words) distracted. Her focus is allowed to drift from Jesus to her work for Him. And that, in turn, leads her to get rather testy and frustrated with her sister. So she comes to Jesus and says: "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me!"

So much for Martha. Let's now turn to Mary....And all that we hear in regards to her worship of Jesus is that she sat at His feet, listening. Not that she came to Jesus and welcomed Him. Not that she invited Him in. Not that she fed Him or brought Him anything to drink. Not that she plopped up the cushions for Him sit down in comfort. None of that. Only that she sat at His feet and drank in His Word. You see, her focus is always and only on Christ. On what He is doing and giving. On receiving from Him the gifts that He gives in His Word.

Quite a statement in contrasts, isn't it? Martha is active and busy; Mary is quiet and passive. Martha is intent on DOING; Mary on RECEIVING. Martha apparently saw worship as something that she did for God; Mary viewed it as the very opposite. So, which is right? Is worship our giving back to God (as Martha thought)? Or is it letting God be God (as Mary suggests by her simply sitting at Christ's feet, to take in His gifts)? Or is it both?

Well, you know the answer Jesus gives, don't you? He softly rebukes Martha when He responds to her request that Jesus tell Mary to get off her backside and help. He says (perhaps with a gentle sigh): "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But only one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

We need to be clear: all of Martha's efforts/labors/works WERE indeed worship -- notice, Jesus does not criticize her for doing them. But what He DOES criticize is Martha's losing sight of the "good portion" -- the better part, the thing that REALLY matters. And that, of course, is Christ. Of what He has come to do for us. Of what He gives to us in His Word and Sacraments. Yes, worship includes what we (and Martha) do for God. But none of that can save us -- the only thing that saves us is what Christ has done for us by His life/death/resurrection.

The Augsburg Confession tells us that the highest worship is to trust in Christ as our Help, our Advocate, our Savior. That is, worship -- in its bests and most pure form (or, to use Jesus' phrase from our reading -- the "good portion") -- worship is NOT what we do. Rather it is to receive what God has done, is doing, and promises still to do for us. To joyfully, gratefully, trustingly confess that He has made us and all things. That He provides for our daily bodily needs, even when we seem to be in want. But even more, that He has settled our sin by laying them all on Christ at the cross. That He has purchased and redeemed us from sin/Satan/hell with the holy and precious blood of Christ. And that He gives us all the blessings and benefits Christ has won for us, as the Holy Spirit applies it to us personally in baptism, in hearing the Word, in the absolution, and in the Lord's Supper. That is the "good portion" because that gives us Christ and what He has won.

Our works — though well-intended and done in gratitude — can never save us. No, our sin is far too great for that. Only the blood of the Lamb can cover their stain and blot. Only Jesus as the Sacrifice for our sin. That must be where we place our hope, our trust, our confidence. We all know that. And, I am sure, so did Martha. But sadly, like Martha, all too often we also let the other part of worship -- our works of thanks/response, our offerings of love/service -- we let these things make us distracted. To take our eyes and ears off of Christ. To focus on what WE do. And when that happens, we get into trouble (as did Martha).

Let's face it: we too get caught up in the busy-work of worship at times. For instance, as a pastor, I find myself approaching worship as a chore, a task, that needs to be done. Have I properly prepared for the service? What comes next? Did I pick hymns that people can sing? Am I on schedule, so I can get to the next service? And so I don't hear Jesus; I only think of me and what I am doing.

Or I worry about whether or not we have enough Sunday School teachers. Or will the acolyte remember to show up. Or did the altar guild arrange the communion elements properly. Did the choir have adequate opportunities to rehearse? Are the flowers where they should be? Will the offering be better this week? Will the radio and video of the service be acceptable? And on and on and on. Even more, I might find (like Martha) that I get peeved and upset at others — sisters and brothers in Christ, remember—for not helping more. And, again, Jesus is not heard.

Similarly, those who have other tasks in the church -- like board members, ladies groups, service groups, and other volunteers -- also are tempted to be busy, busy, busy. We all want to serve God. We all want to help our church and school. We all want to share with others. And so, we focus on doing this and that. So much, in fact, that perhaps we forget the "good portion" -- that is, we forget that it is NOT about us and what we do, but rather about Christ and what He has already done for us. **He** has lived for us, to keep the commandments for us. **He** has died for us, to pay for all of our sins. **He** has risen again, to open heaven for us. **He** has ascended to heaven, to rule and reign over all things for our well-being. And He **will** come again, to take us to be with Him forever.

That is the "good portion". The only part that really matters. For that alone saves. But so often we hustle and bustle, here and there, doing this and that, and so we find that we need to hear Jesus' gentle admonition: *"You are worried and troubled about many things. But only one thing is needed..."*

Yes, the good portion is to sit at Jesus' feet and hear His Word. His Word of forgiveness. Of salvation. Of peace and love. **God** does all the work; **we** receive all the benefit. **He** creates and sustains us and all things. **He** pays for our sin. **He** gives us faith in Christ's sacrifice -- and **He** keeps us in that faith -- as the Gospel is given us in Word and sacraments. We need to be like Mary and simply receive those gifts in faith and gratitude. It is all yours — a gift from our Savior, Jesus Christ. What a joy it is to hear that again and again!

However, that is not to say that Martha was all wrong. That is, there most definitely IS a time and place for our works of thanks and praise. God DOES want and expect us to pray. To sing. To witness. To volunteer and serve. To give our offerings. But we need to keep all those things in the proper perspective: they are not the "good portion" (that is, the most important and saving part). No, that belongs only to God. But our works certainly do flow from — and they must follow — our receiving that "good portion".

You come here to be forgiven, so you leave here to forgive others. You come here to listen to Jesus; you leave here to speak for Him. You come here to be served; you leave here to serve God and your neighbor. And there is MUCH to do in that realm. Your work as God's hands and feet, His lips and mouth, His loving arms never ends. Do you want to know HOW to serve God and man? Well, Luther directs us back to the commandments, and tells us that there we find how we are to live out our faith. And, as he says, we will never exhaust such opportunities. He is right. God has lots of work to do. And He does it — using you.

But we never forget the "good portion": Christ Jesus for us. **He** has done it all for us. And for our neighbor. Our work is only a pale, weak, poor imitation of His. But our work truly points to His work. And His work is all that really matters. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.