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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 11 (Pentecost 6), Series C
Saturday, July 20th, 2019
Sunday, July 21st, 2019

Sermon: Holy Habits: Devotion

Text: Luke 10:38-42

Focus: Jesus welcomes us to rest in His Word.

Function: That they would refresh and renew in God's Word.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, 3rd Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Today is the start of a 4-week sermon mini-series titled "Holy Habits." What are holy habits? You've probably heard them described previously as spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices—things like prayer, Bible study, tithing, evangelism, and service, among many others.

The trouble with spiritual disciplines is that they require *discipline*! And that can be rather daunting. We tend to make spiritual disciplines sounds like task list you're supposed to carry out in order to keep God happy and off your back. You must work at them in order to become a better Christian (or at least that's what we think).

In truth, the spiritual disciplines are really God's gifts to help us grow and mature in our Christian faith. They help us to experience forgiveness and relationship with God. And they help us better love and serve our neighbor. Yet training and practice are necessary to understand their full benefit. So I encourage you to lean in over the next 4 weeks as we listen to what God's Word has to say to us about four holy habits: devotion, prayer, generosity, and trust.

Today's Gospel lesson proves how essential for us is a devotional life grounded in God's Word. The story of Mary and Martha is wonderfully illustrates the contrast between people who are only doers and people who first devote themselves to God's holy Word. Luke tells us that on his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus stops by to check in on his friends, Mary and Martha, who live in Bethany (cf. John 11:1). These are the sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus raises from the dead in John 11. They are close friends, and Martha wants to do right by the rabbi. So she goes into the kitchen and starts cutting up the vegetables, roasting the meat, and rolling the dough for the *challah* bread. A dozen other things also need doing: setting the table, sweeping the floor, putting away the knickknacks and things that litter every surface.

In ancient Israel, the women of the household were the ones who prepared and served the meal while the men entertained the guests. Martha knows her place is in the kitchen—and so is Mary's! Yet all the while that Martha slaves away in the kitchen, her sister Mary just sits in the living room listening to Jesus. Specifically, Luke tells us that Mary sits at Jesus' feet—the typical position of a disciple learning from a rabbi. And while most English versions say that she was listening to his “teaching” or “sayings,” the literal Greek word is simply “word” (*logos*). She listens to his *Word*. Mary sits at Jesus' feet like any other of his disciples, listening to him speaking the very Word of God. She soaks in the blessing as Jesus restores her soul and refreshes her spirit.

During that entire time, Martha sweats away in the kitchen, trying to check things off the long list in her head. As Luke tells us, “Martha was distracted with much serving” until, finally, she had enough! She can't take it anymore. So she throws down her rolling pin and storms into the living room with her hands on her hips and wheat flour in her hair. Martha is a real boss

lady. No wonder! Her name in Aramaic means “mistress or lady of the house.”¹ Martha is used to running things, and if push comes to shove, she’s got no problem running her sister. She’s not even above trying to run *Jesus!*

So rather than yelling at *Mary* and telling her to get off her butt and *do* something, Martha yells at Jesus instead: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me” (Luke 10:40, ESV).² Of course, the right way to deal with conflict is one-on-one and face-to-face, not triangulating with others or operating through a proxy. But Martha wasn’t in the mood to do things “the right way.”

Yes, Martha... yelled... at Jesus. “Tell my sister to get off her butt and *do* something!”

Can you imagine the gall a gal would need to ream out the Savior of the world?! Clearly, Jesus was a *very* close personal friend, so close that Martha felt she could be straight with him. (*Aside:* By the way, this isn’t the last time she rebuked the Lord. In John 11, after her brother Lazarus died, she blamed Jesus and accused him, saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” [John 11:21]. But that’s another story for a different day.)

And here’s what I love about Jesus: rather than rebuking her sharply in return, or even throwing up his hands and saying, “Ladies, I’m not going to get in the middle of this,” instead Jesus turns Martha’s exasperation into a teachable moment.

“Martha, Martha,” he says gently, repeating her name as you would to a dear child. “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.” Wrapped up in worry, Martha is like the seed that falls among the thorns in Jesus’ Parable of the Sower (Mark 4). In that story, in which a farmer haphazardly scatters seed to the four winds, some of it falls upon the road, some of it upon the rocks, some of it among the thorns, and some of it in good soil. But the

¹ William F. Arndt, *Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956, 1984), 293.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

seed that fell among the thorns was choked by the thorns and failed to yield a crop (Mark 4:7).

Jesus explains the story like this: “As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (Mark 13:22).

Tragically, Martha is like the seed that fell among the thorns. She’s a thorny woman, high strung, and Type “A” all the way. And even though she loves Jesus, she is “distracted with much serving.” Her serving becomes slavery. Her hospitality becomes a burden. And so she fails to listen to Jesus, instead allowing the worries and cares of the world choke out the joy of just listening to Jesus and soaking up his Word.

“Martha, Martha,” Jesus says, “you are anxious and troubled about many things, but *one thing is necessary*. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42). Only *one thing* is necessary: time in the Word. Jesus doesn’t need a four-course meal. His teaching *is* the main course. Time in the Word reaps a harvest for eternity; and it can never be taken away from you.

Jesus doesn’t dismiss Martha. He knows she’s doing it all *for* him. She’s trying to be a good hostess. In Middle-Eastern cultures, hospitality is a big deal, and she’s trying to do the best she can to roll out the red carpet for the rabbi on a surprise visit. Martha *loves* Jesus. And Jesus loves Martha, which is why he wants her to relax. She needs to take a deep breath. She needs to let go of trying to make things happen and just *be*. *Martha* needs to get out of the kitchen and sit down beside her sister in Bible study. Just like Mary, Martha needs to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to his Word. Where else can she go? He has the words of eternal life (John 6:68).

And yes, Jesus and the other guests need to eat. And, yes, there are places to set, courses to prepare, and dishes to clean and put away. But when that meal is done, there will still be

another and another and another after that. No matter how delicious or exquisite, none of Martha's morsels are going to last forever. "But man shall not live by bread alone" (Luke 4:4). The *real* food, the best food, is Jesus' Word. This is the holy manna, the Bread of Life which Jesus speaks, which he himself embodies (John 6). Whoever eats this bread will live forever.

Mary made the right choice because no matter how much we do or accomplish, there will always be more to do. But the Word of the Lord endures forever, and it cannot ever be taken away from us. So if all we do is do and do and do until we're overdone and spent, what kind of life is that? Jesus calls us to be *servants*, not doormats or martyrs.

I think it's important to recognize that Jesus doesn't ever say Martha is doing a bad thing. But good things get in the way of the best thing. More often than not, the enemy of the great isn't evil or bad; usually, *good* is the enemy of great. Unless we say, "No," to good things, we can never "yes" to the one thing needed more than anything else in life: the Word of God.

This is true in our lives too. We get so busy helping other people, volunteering at church, driving our kids from here to there, and entertaining business clients, that it's easy to set aside the Word or let it fall through our fingers forgotten. At times we may look at our Bibles gathering dust and feel a sting of guilt on our conscience. We know that we *should* read our Bibles. But we just don't have time! We don't need to go to church or Bible class or Sunday school to be a Christian. "My sermon is the way I live." Then slowly but surely, the good things of life turn out to be thorns creeping up around our necks and choking the life out of us. Because like Martha, we too are "distracted with much serving" (cf. Luke 10:40).

Let me tell you: I am *super* grateful for all the Marthas here at Epiphany. Without men and women like Martha, who would fold the bulletins, mow the grass, teach Sunday school, lead

Council meetings, setup the tents for Oktoberfest, and balance the books? We need Martha! Martha keeps the church operating at full efficiency and capacity. All of these are good things.

But you can only run on adrenaline for so long before you run down, whether in your career, family, or kingdom service. We cannot care for others unless we take care of ourselves. We cannot feed others unless we are first fed. We cannot teach others unless we are taught the Word. And we cannot serve others until God first serves us. As the Bible says, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Before we speak a word of prayer, lift a hand to help, or drop a dollar in the offering plate, we first must be fed. Our devotion in worship and private Bible study are not done to make God happy. They’re something God does for us, with us—*in* us! God says, “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Ps. 81:10b). God wants to bless *you* and pour his life into *you*. He does this by feeding you with his Word and satisfying your spiritual thirst with the blood he shed on the cross for the forgiveness of all your sin. You know, there’s a reason why our Lutheran liturgies are called the “Divine Service.” Because in the Divine Service, in Christian worship, despite all our prayer and praise, it’s primarily *God* who serves us—and not the other way around.

Today Jesus welcomes you with wonderful hospitality. Today he invites you to sit at his feet and listen to his Word. Today he tells that your sins are forgiven because he died and paid the price for all the things we have done—and all the things we have left “undone.” For, as Christ declared from the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). All the doing is done because Jesus did it all. So come, rest, and refresh. Choose the good portion, which can never be taken away from you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.