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Pentecost 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Good Portion”
Text: Luke 10:38-42

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I wonder how long Jesus had been there, at Martha's house, with Mary sitting at His feet, teaching? How long did it take Martha to get to the end of her rope? How long did she stew before she just had to say something?

I wonder because Jesus doesn't say anything to Martha about her serving, about her being distracted, *until she speaks*. Until she turns against her sister and criticizes her. Only then does Jesus rebuke her. Gently. ***Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things***, and apparently, one of those things was Mary. So the serving wasn't the problem. The division was. And the answer was not for Mary to stop and join Martha, but for Martha to stop and join Mary. ***For Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.***

For as Jesus Himself would later say, *the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:28). That's what Jesus, the *Good Teacher* (Luke 18:18), the *Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:25ff), the *Good Shepherd* (John 10:11), has come to speak and do. To do good. Good as in creation before sin good, when everything was good and all together it was *very good*. Jesus has come to restore that. To restore us and all creation. To overcome sin and death, but also to overcome *division*. The division that sin caused between Adam and Eve, and between them and God.

That's ***the good portion*** Jesus was speaking to Mary about. That Jesus was speaking and Mary was receiving. They weren't just engaging in small talk, the latest gossip about what was happening in Bethany. If so, Mary *should* probably have been up and helping her sister! This wasn't that. This was good talk, Gospel talk, Jesus death and resurrection talk. Talk that both Mary and Martha needed.

And while we're not told, I think Martha joined her sister there at Jesus' feet. I wish we had been told! But the clue, I think, comes the next time we are told about Mary and Martha, and that is when their brother Lazarus is near death, and then dies (John 11). They send for the one who has taught them that He not only *can* do something

about this, but has come for this! To overcome death.

But Jesus doesn't arrive in time. Actually, you may remember, He purposefully delays. Creating another teachable moment. But when he arrives, both Mary and Martha confess the same truth: *Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died* (John 11:21, 32). They heard, they remembered, they believe. And interestingly, Mary speaks those words from the very same place she had been before: at Jesus' feet. *Speak again, Lord, those good words, that good portion*. Words of comfort and hope. For they were divided again, this time from their brother. And it hurt.

And then not long after that, just six days before Jesus would die, in fact, Jesus was in Bethany again, at a dinner hosted by Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (John 12). Martha is again serving (nothing wrong with that), and Mary is again at Jesus' feet. But this time, she isn't just listening, now she's serving! She is anointing them with a very expensive ointment and then wiping them with her hair. And the rebuke from Jesus again comes only when division is again sown - when Mary is again criticized, this time by Judas. Jesus is not going to take this away from her this time either, for she is getting Him ready for His burial. Another confession of the truth, the good, of what Jesus has come to do.

Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.

That's the way it is in our world though, isn't it? Things are taken away from us. There is division. What God has joined together man does, in fact, separate. We do for ourselves, we take for ourselves, we think about ourselves. Even when we don't and we serve, how often - and how quickly! - those Martha thoughts intrude, and stew, until they boil over into criticism causing division. Our serving is not the problem. **The sin in us is.** The sin in us that twists serving into resentment, that turns love into jealousy, that turns friend against friend, spouse against spouse. And ultimately, us against God. ***Lord, don't you care?*** You don't care, do you? ***Tell her,*** tell him, tell them, ***to help me.***

He could have. Jesus could have looked down at Mary and said: *She's right, you know. Go off now, be a good little girl, and help her serve Me.*

He could have. But there are other words Jesus has come to speak. Words that say how He has come to help and serve us. How He has come to save us. The words that are the ***one thing necessary*** for us to hear. Words to heal the divisions among us and give us comfort and peace. That when the storms spin up and rage in your life, you know the one who still storms. That when the world and its evil rises up, you know the one who has overcome the world. That when death looms large and menacing, you know the one who has trampled down death by His own death and

resurrection. And when the evil one comes and accuses you, and whispers in your ear and reminds you of all the ways you have failed and fallen short, all your sins and stubbornness, all the division you have caused by your hurtful words and selfishness and criticism, you know the one who says: *I forgive you all your sins. I died for all those sins. I took them upon myself on the cross. They're on me and not on you. I do not condemn you. You are my child, I baptized you. I love you.*

To hear those words of life is the key. It is when we *don't* hear them, when we stop looking to the cross, that's when the troubles begin. And we demand instead of serve. We hold grudges instead of forgiving. We criticize instead of confess. And once we start down that path, it's hard to stop. Because the work is never done. There's always more to do, more to resent, more to criticize.

But there is a better way, a good way, a good portion. And it ***will not be taken away from you.*** It is here for you, always. To sit at Jesus' feet, to sit at the foot of His cross, and hear Him, receive Him, be washed by His Blood, and fed by His Body and Blood. To receive His service, to make you good again.

So, those storms in your life? There is Jesus with you, in them. Death rising up and looming large? There is Jesus with you, in death, and then rising from death for you. For as He told Mary and Martha, when storms were raging in *their* hearts and Lazarus was laying dead in his tomb, *I am the resurrection and the life* (John 11:25). Note: not the resurrection *only*. He is the life. Our life. Our eternal life, but also our life now. The life we need.

Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. Maybe that describes you. There certainly is no shortage of things to be anxious and troubled about in our world and in our homes! But what's the answer? More us or more Jesus? More Law or more Gospel? More doing or more receiving?

Serving is important. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, we are commanded to serve! We heard it last week at the end of the Parable of the Good Samaritan: *you go, and do likewise* (Luke 10:37). Love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27). But only ***one thing is necessary***: not what you do, but what Jesus does. For Jesus to be your Good Samaritan. For Jesus to love you. When you have that, you have all you need. When you have that, the rest will fall into place. Not that everything will suddenly be easy, right, and fair in your life - it may not. But it will be good. Maybe not how we define good and think of good, but God's good. God's way of working good. Which for Jesus was dying on a cross! Which nobody thought was good! And yet it was. The best good ever. Suffering that brought forgiveness. Death that brought life. Separation that brought oneness.

So maybe, just maybe, in your life, too. When things go wrong, when things are tough, when you are suffering . . . Jesus is working to bring you back. Back to His house, back to His Word, back to prayer. Back to *Himself*. To help you, serve you, and work good in you. His work, not yours. That having served you, you now serve one another. The ***one thing necessary***, the one thing needful, working *in* you *for* you, and working *through* you for others.

And maybe to finish up here, an example, a story I was told recently. About dealing with an elderly person, agitated, confused, with memory problems. If you've ever had to do that, that's rough. And tough. A tough place to be. For *both* people. So to try to help one day - a particularly difficult day - they put on videos of church services. Instead of doing and serving, they just sat at Jesus' feet and listened. And, I was told, it helped. They watched something like four in a row! Because they needed that. They needed Jesus. They needed that one thing. His Word, His peace, His good.

So maybe us, too. Instead of more doing, more this, more that, more here, more there, which can so easily lead to resentment and criticism and division, we need more Jesus. His Word, His peace, His good. Serving is important, and good. But ***one thing is necessary***. For Jesus to serve you.

So come now and be served by Him here at His Table. And every day this week, too, be served by Him in His Word, and with His forgiveness. It is ***the good portion***. It is what you need. It is Jesus, for you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.