

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 21, 2010
Luke 10:38-42

“Keeping First Things First”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

I have the permission of my mother to tell the story which will introduce this morning’s message. As many of you may recall, last Reformation Sunday, Pastor Matthew Harrison of Lutheran Church Missouri Synod World Relief and Human Care preached here at Mount Olive and also taught our Bible Class that day. That afternoon, he preached at the city wide Reformation service at Trinity downtown. That noon, my mother invited him to have dinner at her home before the service that afternoon. He graciously accepted the invitation. Last Tuesday afternoon, when I received the news about the election results of the synodical convention in Houston and that Pastor Harrison had been elected president of the synod, I was sitting with my mother waiting for her eye doctor appointment. She excitedly said, “How wonderful, I served dinner to the future president of the Missouri Synod.” Now that reaction is a very good introduction to the account in the Gospel lesson for today, though I am sure that Pastor Harrison himself would emphatically say that he is not worth comparing with the guest who is described in the text.

I. The Account

The story told in the Gospel today is the familiar account of the visit of Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha of Bethany. There are three individuals who are important here—the sisters Mary and Martha and Jesus. But it is really Jesus who is the focus of this text, for the way Jesus was received by the two sisters sets the stage for what is said. As the text states, Jesus and his disciples were traveling through the region and they came to the village where Martha welcomed Jesus into her home. Think of the excitement that must have been part of that scene. Martha inviting and bringing to her own home the Lord, the Messiah of Israel. And from the description of Martha’s preparations it is clear that she is well aware of the importance of Jesus. So it is evident that she works hard to prepare a fine meal for him and wishes to offer him the best of her hospitality. She is intent on being the perfect hostess making her guest feels welcome and honored. So Martha goes about her task with great devotion.

In the process a certain tension develops with her sister. For the text states that Mary sat listening to the teaching of Jesus. Now Martha is more than a little upset by this. She addresses Jesus and says, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” She tries to enlist Jesus in her effort to get Mary to help her. Martha had only one thing (or many things) on her mind at that moment and could not understand what Mary was doing. And so it is that the Lord instructed her gently and patiently. Please note that in so doing he did not say that Martha was doing something wrong, just that there

was something else far more important. He says, "Martha, Martha, 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." Yes, there is one thing needed on that day and it is the same thing that is needed in all generations—a humble and reverent response to the words of Jesus—the great Teacher of all.

It is actually quite difficult to fault the actions of Martha. And this is really not the purpose of this text. It is of interest that this account follows quite closely upon the accounts we have looked at in the previous weeks. The disciples would have brought down the judgment of God upon a Samaritan village because they failed to show hospitality. And then Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan who shows hospitality and love for the man left for dead along the road. In the actions of Martha we see hospitality practiced even as Abraham in the Old Testament lesson for this week welcomed the Lord to his tent and was most hospitable. And now we see both Mary and Martha in their own way pointing to the same person with honor. Martha, hurrying about, preparing a meal fit for a king and Mary, sitting and listening quietly like a child at the knees of her father to the word of Jesus. For both sisters their attention was on Jesus. What a contrast to the world and our lives today. For our theme for this morning would remind us to keep "Putting First Things First."

II. The Question

That of course is the question of the age. In a sense, I am preaching to the choir today. Those of you here this day have at least taken the time to come to church and hear the word of Jesus. Even those listening to our service on the radio this morning have made the effort to tune in and listen. But with all the other demands and interests in the world these days that vie for people's attention, why is it that the word of Jesus is the most needed, the most important? There would be many who would reject that assumption immediately. They see much more importance in their financial investments or in their scientific discoveries. They are involved in the technological wonders of this time or the entertainment offered. They can find many other things that are of supposedly greater importance. But none of them really are. But all these other things are of passing value. They are transitory. They are here for a while, only to pass away.

In the epistle for this day, the apostle Paul points out most directly why listening to the word of Jesus is most important. He writes: "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel, that you heard which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven ..." That is the heart of matter. The redemption of God for our sins which Christ has accomplished for us is made known in the Gospel. We must hear the word of Christ for it is the power which strengthens our lives. So Paul concludes the epistle for today: "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ." We must hear of Christ the Lord and Savior. We must proclaim

him. But above we all need to be a lot like Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus and quietly listening to what he would teach us that we might share that word as well.

Part of the problem with the time in which we live is that no one wants to listen. Everyone has his or her own opinion. Everyone is quick to put in their own two cents worth. In the process even those who should be listening to the word of Jesus are too often too busy talking to really hear. That is why the Lord said that Mary had chosen the better portion and that it would not be taken away from her. Perhaps here is a reference to the parable of the sower and the seed. The word can be choked out by the worries and cares of life, but when it takes root and grows it bears fruit a hundredfold.

When we are engaged in hearing God's word we will certainly be blessed by it. When we are fed by the Word and Sacraments that is when we grow. We are putting first things first when we recognize the love of God for us in our Savior and we trust his promises. That is God's promise to us this day. Let us grow and remain faithful by hearing His word. As Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." That is putting first things first.

In his short address to the convention of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod following his election as president, Pastor Harrison said, "I promise you that I will be as straight with you as I possibly can, to the best of my ability, guided by the Spirit of God. I pledge to you that I will not coerce you. I will do my best by the Word of Christ to lead with a generous Gospel of Jesus Christ, which forgives us all of our sins, and motivates us to love and care for our neighbor in mercy and compassion. And I will work as hard as I possibly can for unity around the clear and compelling Word of God and nothing else." Let us be thankful to our Lord that he has granted to our church body a leader who is putting first things first. Let us also continue to pray for him and for all the church that the Lord's word would be our true light and guide—for it is the one thing necessary.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.