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Pentecost 9 – Luke 10:38-42 – The Right Order of Service

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It's a principle that everyone knows but not everyone follows, which really just reinforces the principle. If you have a big day ahead of you, whether physically or mentally, and you want to be on top of your game, make sure you eat a good breakfast when you get up. It wakes you up, makes you more alert, and it gives you the energy you need to do whatever you're doing. Just ask Wheaties, just ask Jimmy Dean, and just ask mom. They'll all tell you.

And they'll tell you the opposite is true, too – if you don't eat breakfast in the morning, at least not a good one, the rest of your day is probably going to suffer for it. Your mind isn't going to work as well or be as sharp and you're probably going to be a little sluggish. So either way, whether you learn the easy way or the hard way, you find out the principle that you need to be fed before you can really do any good work of your own.

That was a principle learned the hard way for Martha in our Gospel lesson for today. But for her it wasn't so much a physical principle with literal food, as it was a spiritual principle with the spiritual food Jesus offered. Martha was working so hard to serve Jesus; she was putting her whole heart and everything she had into her dinner preparations, while her sister Mary just sat there. Finally she blew up at Mary – and a little at Jesus, too. She'd gotten herself all out of sorts, so her Savior gently and lovingly had to bring her back into focus. And this is what she and all of us need to hear: keep in your mind and in your heart the right order of service for your spiritual lives. First Jesus serves us; then we serve Jesus.

But it's really not very hard for us to find sympathy for Martha, is it? She had an awful lot of work to do in a pretty small amount of time. Who knows how far ahead of time she found out that Jesus and his disciples were coming. Probably not as much as she would have liked. And that's right, I said Jesus and his disciples. It seems like she probably had to prepare this elaborate feast from scratch for no less than fifteen people, maybe more. Think about her having to throw together appetizers, salads, meat, rolls, desserts, condiments, maybe other sides, and then on top of that having to set the table and get all the guests carefully arranged and seated. How well-tempered would you be if you were pressed for time and no one lifted a finger to help you get ready for one of your big holiday meals? No, it really isn't hard for us to understand where Martha was coming from when her frustration boiled over at Jesus and Mary. *“Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”*

So why is it Martha who gets chided? It's because even though we can understand her frustration, that still didn't make it right. *“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, ‘you are*

*worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.’”* See, what Martha was doing was great for any other big-shot dinner guest she might have entertained some other time. But as warm and extravagant as this welcome was, it wasn't the kind of welcome that Jesus wanted. Jesus came to earth to serve, rather than to be served, remember? Well, Martha didn't. She got caught up in trying to make sure Jesus and his disciples were comfortable and well taken care of, which in itself is absolutely noble, but in this case she forgot the right order of service.

Martha thought that Jesus was her dinner guest, when in fact Jesus first wanted her to be the guest and himself to be the host. That's because he wasn't serving literal food that goes in your stomach, he was serving spiritual food that goes in your heart – and that was so much more valuable than the food Martha had to offer. Mary got that. She knew that when Jesus came to town, their priorities changed. Their purpose wasn't just to wow him with a good wine and dine. Their purpose in inviting Jesus into their home was to sit at his feet and be fed with his life-giving Word, so when Jesus arrived, Mary rightly put all the rest of their preparations on the back-burner.

And who can blame her, because there's never in the history of this world been a better meal served. Jesus brings his people course after course of the richest fare, free of charge, without limit, and without expiration. “Brother, your sins are forgiven and washed away forever in my blood. Sister, I went to the cross for you, because that's how much I love you. Brother, right now I'm preparing a place for you in my mansions in heaven. And sister, I will never abandon you; know that even as we speak I'm watching over you, and soon I'm going to bring you to be with me.” That spiritual food that Jesus serves to his people makes filet mignon look like chopped liver in comparison, because it doesn't just fill you, it fulfills you; and it doesn't just quiet your stomach's grumblings for a few hours, it satisfies your hunger for eternity.

How blessed we are that our Lord fills us up with his Word every week, and sets a table before us every time we eat and drink at his Supper. You know, that little wafer and that little sip of wine may not seem like much to the naked eye, but for sinners like us, that little bit of your Savior's body and blood given and shed for you is the best meal you'll ever have, because with it come the gifts of forgiveness, new life, and everlasting salvation.

So my friends, take the cue from all those breakfast commercials: don't miss a meal. You have so many opportunities in a given week to be fed by Jesus: two or three weekly services here, depending on the time of the year; worship services on other nights of the week in our other area churches; weekly Bible studies; internet streams and radio broadcasts; and especially your own personal and family devotions at home throughout the week, and here's

why you should take advantage of them: when Jesus serves his people, it gives us a clear conscience and the hope of eternal life; it gives us a close-knit, caring fellowship with others who eat at his table; and it gives us the energy and motivation we need to do the Lord's work in whatever ways he's asked of us.

And that last point there is important, because that's the right order of service: first Jesus serves us, *then* we serve Jesus. It's just like mom always told you how you need a good breakfast before you start your day. It's the most important meal there is, because if you want the rest of your day to be productive, you need to start out with plenty of gas in your tank. So too with our spiritual lives. First thing's first. We need to be fed by Jesus, and only then can we serve him in faith and thankfulness, as he wants to be served.

And again, that's what Martha found out when Jesus came to visit that day. She prepared this great feast, and I'm sure it was top-notch. But I'm guessing that Jesus, if given the choice between that extravagant banquet and something quick and easy, would rather have been fed the simpler meal if that meant that he could have more time to feed Mary and Martha's souls. That's important to remember about Jesus: he doesn't want your service in and of itself. He wants *you* – your heart, your trust, your devotion, now and always. Jesus wants to serve you first, and only then does he want your heart to overflow into service for him and others.

That's what Jesus told Martha: "*Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*" Martha had it wrong here, but Mary had it right. Mary had the kind of life-balance that Jesus looks for in his people. Now maybe you can't tell it so much from the NIV's translation here, but the original text actually makes it seem like Mary had been doing her part beforehand to get ready for the group's arrival, but then when Jesus arrived she shifted her focus to him. Martha got angry with Mary for not helping, but really Mary did her work when she was supposed to, and then when the proper time came, she kept that one thing needful – the Word of God – in its rightful #1 spot in her heart and life.

And friends, that's where we need to keep it, too. When we have an opportunity to be fed by Jesus, we need to take it. We need to respect it. We need to value it above all else, because there's no better or more important way to spend our time in this world. Now no one's saying you can't play baseball or dance or take a vacation on the weekends; just make sure that wherever you are and whatever you're doing, you're taking time to prioritize feeding your faith, like Mary did. That's because life in this sinful world can be so tough, and our God's Word for us guides us through those confusing and frustrating times when your life gets out of focus and you don't even know which way is up, and it helps us get through those trying times when you're fighting through tears and all you can ask is "Why?" In those times in our

lives, the Word of our Savior calls us back to himself, renews us with the assurance of full forgiveness and free salvation, and revitalizes us for service in his kingdom.

So having been served by Jesus here in his Word and shortly again in his Supper, how then can you serve him? Will you remember the right order of service? Brothers and sisters, service and work and activities are wonderful things, and watching church online from home or on the road has its benefits. But if you let all that get in the way of being here personally for *God's* service to us in his house, at his Table, and shoulder-to-shoulder in mutual encouragement with your fellow Christians, then that's like passing up the finest of full-course feasts for a quick run to the drive-thru. No, let's remember that old saying: if you're too busy for Jesus, you're just plain too busy. Yes, Jesus loves to see our willingness to serve him and our enjoyment of the activities he blesses our lives with, but he wants service like Mary's that came from a right heart and straight priorities. We need to be served *by* him first, and only *then* can we serve him the way he really wants. So as you look at your lives and your service to your Savior, look first and most of all at that one thing needful, a non-negotiable dedication to being fed with the Word of God, because that will bring everything else into focus. Let's keep our eyes fixed on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our Savior slain for us and for this world we're trying to reach, because when we do, our God promises that everything else will fall into place.

You know, practically speaking, Mary and Martha really needed this meal from Jesus. What Jesus had to feed them needed to sustain them through some awfully difficult months ahead that included the sickness, death, and raising of their brother Lazarus, as well as the threats on his life from angry Jewish religious leaders that followed. The coming months would also bring the suffering and death of Jesus himself, which could have shaken them to their very core. But by that time they'd been filled with that one thing needful, and that made their faith unshakable. They knew that no grave could ever hold their Savior down, and they knew that no matter what, one day they would see him again in heaven.

And brothers and sisters, that's a spiritual meal that Jesus still serves to us today and one that he wants us to have often. That's because there's nothing more needful for us than eating at our Savior's table right here in his house. Our hearts rightly yearn to serve Christ gloriously in our lives, but perhaps the way we can most glorify our Savior in this world is by gladly hearing and learning his Word. Our God has blessed this congregation with so many good, solid people; with some recent facility upgrades; with a great preschool; and with a friendly reputation in the community, among other things, but if people know us for our service to Christ, may we more so be known, like Mary, for our appreciation of Christ's service to us through his Word. God grant us that firm conviction of the right order of service. Amen.