

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent: March 26, 2023 jj

Rev'd Mark B. Stirdivant, Christ our Savior Ev. Lutheran Church, St. Augustine, Florida

✠ sdg ✠

Martha, the sister of Lazarus and Mary, is one of the most-described women of the New Testament. From what the Holy Spirit wrote through the sacred human writers of Scripture, we actually have a pretty good idea of who she was. Martha was truly a believer in Christ, not just a passing friendly acquaintance. Christ had planted the gift of faith in her heart so that she believed and trusted that He was the true Messiah, the Son of God who was promised throughout the whole history of Israel to come when the time was right. Even more than this, Martha was a believer in conflict with herself, that is, in conflict with her sinful human nature with which she had been born. In her case, that meant she was often wrapped up in a distracting attention to earthly things.

Martha was the one who at another time was faced with the surprise, drop-in dinner guests and had to scramble to get a big enough meal put together. Suddenly, there's thirteen more travel-weary mouths to feed! That's all that came to her mind. As Jesus would tell her, Martha was distracted with much serving. Her sister Mary demonstrated hospitality to the Lord's Word by sitting at His feet, listening to the heavenly food that was spoken through His lips. Martha snapped not at Mary, but at Jesus, even commanding Him to order Mary to help her out in the kitchen. Jesus softly gave a reply that Mary had chosen what is most important, the one thing that is necessary, reminding her that worship of God is primarily receiving, not giving.

Later, but not much later than that, Mary and Martha were faced with the death of their brother Lazarus. Both of them expressed frustration with Jesus that He didn't come sooner, while there was still a chance of saving his life. They sent for Him, but Jesus waited anyway. But when He did come, this time it

was to Martha that God gave the ability to confess the true faith. This time, no distractions prevailed over her mind, the Savior's words, "Your brother will rise again," those powerful words awakened Martha's faith so that she could state her firm belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Jesus only clarified for her that the resurrection of the dead is not a separate promise of God, as if you have to believe a series of disconnected facts in order to be a Christian. No, all things, including the resurrection of the dead, come together, hinge and depend on Jesus. He gives it all, because He is it all. "I am the resurrection and the life," He says. Nothing that you believe in is a mere detail, separated from Christ. When you are joined to Him through your Baptism, your faith is strong even though more often than not, you feel weak.

But then we come to the grave of Lazarus. Everyone there sees the inescapable, terrible reality of death. As that stone-blocked grave-cave comes into view, no heart is left untouched. Most remarkably, even Jesus is moved to shed tears, even when He already knew the miracle He was about to perform. The distraction is simply too much for Martha. Even though minutes before, she confidently replied, "Yes, I believe, Amen, it shall be so," her mind nevertheless turned to something else. Almost without thinking, she opposed the Son of God yet again, trying unwittingly to prevent Him from this glorious miracle. Because to see the power of God that brings life, she first must smell, yes, she must smell the hideous power of sin that had brought death. "Lord, by this time there will be an odor." We don't want to go through that. As Romans 8 puts it, the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God. But just as before, when all the pots and pans and plates were stacked around her, Jesus gently rebuked her again, but He also promised her that she

would see the glory of God in the resurrection of her brother.

Thus we know so much about Martha from these Gospel accounts, not just because it makes a great story and someone could possibly write a good movie or miniseries script from it. There's no shortage of those! You need to know all this about Martha's distractions because they are the same distractions that afflict you. You tend to resist God's serving you in favor of your self-righteous service to Him. You have your minds on the things of the flesh, on how you'll provide for your family, on how you'll get through your next test or project, on how you'll improve your popularity or do anything possible to get what you really want at the moment. If you're not preoccupied with paying off old student loans, then it's probably because you're worrying instead about your retirement. Perhaps you have faced the death of someone close recently, and it led you to question God in some way. Of course, you never let on about it to others, and you were able to say the truth of what you believe, but you did think to yourself that the Lord must have let you down, or that in some way you failed Him and now you're paying the consequences. Might as well not hope for things to get any better.

Repent. Jesus says that the flesh, the sinful, earthly desires you wish to fulfill, will not inherit the kingdom of God. The more your mind is on those things, the more the devil has you convinced that the heavenly things are not for you. The evil one attacks you with the distractions of grief, doubt and anxiety to make you think that your hope is lost, that your bones are dried up, and you are in conflict with yourself. Repent, turn back from that hopelessness and return to the life-giving waters of your baptism, for without the gift of God's forgiveness in your life, you will remain a collection of dry bones, disconnected and scattered all around.

Listen to your Savior's powerful words. He who commanded the dead man to come out of the grave gently rebukes you, like He did Martha. And His Word that says your sins are forgiven is just as powerful as the Word He spoke to raise Lazarus. For in very much the same way, you were dead to God, in fact, by nature you were hostile to Him. But His Word of peace changed all that. He did not let you down. He turned your heart around and washed you clean in His blood. He took your sin and death from you and killed it—He let it die with Himself on the cross so that it would no longer have any power over you. On the third day He who is the resurrection and the life, rose from the dead Himself so that you along with Martha and all the faithful may confidently receive His gift of grace and say, "Yes, Lord, I believe. Amen, it shall be so, even for me."

Trust in the Word of Jesus Christ! Only He removes the power of the distractions and self-conflict that Satan throws into your life. Only He can crucify, kill, and drown the Old Adam within you, so that you daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. And it is only Jesus who can show up in the midst of a struggling, self-centered, hypocritical collection of sinners, and make out of all those dry, disconnected bones the one, united, Body of Christ. He makes the church a great army of peace to spread the pure Word of God together with genuine love to our surrounding and changing community. This is all His doing, and in His time, and not a result of our ingenious tactics, which are only designed to help us in some merely earthly way.

And not only does Jesus give you and the church new life, but He also strengthens and sustains that life within you, renewing you day after day. He gives His Body and Blood that took away the death of Lazarus, that removed the distractions of Martha, and that paid for your sin, and puts that Body and Blood right back into your mouth as immortal food. Holy Communion doesn't remind you of resurrection

and life, it is resurrection and life because it is Jesus—His very Body and Blood. Today He has come to you and has forgiven you. Your mind is no longer on the things of the earthly flesh, but it is on the heavenly things that are here today proclaimed with joy, even as we prepare next week to recall the suffering and death that made it all possible.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.