

"Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let THY gifts to us be blest." Have you ever sat and thought about the words spoken in that little prayer? While our common table prayer is fine and we certainly want our Lord to be in our presence, has it ever occurred to you that there is something odd about inviting God to be our guest while at the same time acknowledging that it is the Lord who hosts our meals. "let THY gifts to us be blest."

Our catechism teaches us to cite Psalm 145 in preface to our meals: "The eyes of all look to You, O Lord, and You give them their food at the proper time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing."

From God---To us. We are the guests, He is the host, the provider of the food. That is the image we are given in the Scriptures and that is the image which we must have before us if we are going to carefully examine today's Gospel lesson, our text.

Come, Lord Jesus, be our host. That could very well be the summary of St. Luke's account of Jesus' visit to the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus. Both sisters were certainly acquainted with the rules of hospitality; that one was under obligation to provide a meal and drink and even lodging for a visitor. Abraham showed himself such a hospitable host when the Lord came walking up while he was sitting under the oaks of Mamre--you will recall that he immediately took charge and went from person to person to make certain that a feast was set before his esteemed visitors and Martha was no less inclined to do that for her Lord.

Not like the Pharisee who didn't even provide a washing bowl for our Lord's feet before he was to eat, or oil to be anointed with, Martha was concerned about providing everything for her Lord --she wanted to get it just right, out of honor for her esteemed guest. If we put Martha in the best possible light, and I believe that we are entirely justified in doing so because she was a believer and one of our Lord's closest friends, we can justifiably say that Martha was totally enwrapped in seeing that Jesus was made to feel at home.

But there is a time to be served and a time to serve---Mary showed a different kind of hospitality to Jesus; a hospitality of honor and attention, Martha busily prepared to host the Savior, Mary set about to be His guest. Martha wanted to provide, Mary wanted to receive.

Both are good, but which is better? Which was the greater form of hospitality? To serve as host, or to recognize that in the Savior's presence, WE become HIS guests? Martha had chosen the former, but Mary chose the latter, and Jesus said: "it will not be taken from her."

This is perhaps a hard thing for us busy, proud and independent people to conceive or accept. We really don't like being the objects of some one else's service. It's hard for some (if not all of us) to be cheerful receivers of the gifts of others--we feel beholden. We don't really want to be the purely passive recipients of what another has to give. We aren't alone in this either. Peter wasn't really comfortable with Jesus bending down and washing his feet. And quite frankly, regarding last Sunday's gospel lesson, many more people would identify themselves with being the Good Samaritan than identifying themselves as the wounded, bloody and beaten man who needs the Good Samaritan's help and aid.

Simply put, we'd rather be the server than the served. We'd rather be the giver than the recipient. But when it comes to Jesus, it is necessary that we first be Mary, for only after we have been served, do we have anything to give.

Being served is the true nature of the Church. Yes, certainly, we come together here to sing praises to God, our Lord, to join our voices with the angels and saints in heaven, lauding Christ and glorifying God, our Savior, that's a proper thank-you for His service. But Jesus does not draw us near that we might give to Him, but that He might give to us.

Certainly, He gladly hears our prayers, our praise, our worship, and they are truly a sweet smelling sacrifice, filling Jesus' holy temple like a cloud of incense. But Christian worship is acceptable to God because our God has first accepted us in Jesus. He has made us Holy in Christ's blood. Remember the priests of old could never come into God's temple until they had been first purified by blood. So also, Jesus serves us first by cleansing us of sin that we might then be servants. First, we must receive; and

then, we give. But to make it perfectly clear---at its most basic level---our worship is receiving. It is the highest form of hospitality by which we recognize that Jesus Christ is host, and we are His guests of honor. That's why when a person says that he or she can worship God in nature on a lake, in a boat, or in the middle of a field with a bat or soccer ball or golf club, or snuggled in bed---we're are only kidding ourselves--that is NOT worship. Because in those places Jesus is not serving.

Jesus is where he has promised to be, and while God is the force which keeps nature the way it is, he has promised to be HERE, in HIS WORD and in HIS last will and testament gifts (HIS BODY AND BLOOD). These are not found in nature, they are found only here among his chosen people, for church is where the Word is proclaimed in all its purity and the sacraments are administered rightly, it is HERE where our Lord has chosen to host his banquet and serve. We are the ones called in from the highways and byways to be present at the Lord's banquet and we are here dressed in clothes he has provided, His righteousness.

Thus, before the Church is Martha, she must first be Mary.....sitting at the Savior's feet and being served Christ's cool, refreshing Gospel; served with the hearty helping of the Bread of Life, God's Word Made Flesh for our forgiveness. We refer to this as the Divine Service, for good reason. Divine, because God is present. Service, because our Lord is doing something for His people.

What a difference it would make if all Christians understood this better! Can you imagine waking up on Sunday, thinking to yourself: "Nah, I don't think I want the Lord to serve me today; I'd rather serve myself by catching up on things around the house or doing stuff I want to do"? Could you imagine thinking: "I don't really want or need the service of my Savior"? "I don't need Him serving me today."

I doubt that many Christians even recognize that that is what they are truly saying by their absence from the Service of God's house, because they think of worship as something THEY do; as a duty or an obligation; as a habit or a responsibility. They think: "I don't feel like going to church this morning," the way they may not feel like going to work on Monday--only on Sunday they won't have Monday's consequences for their actions to pay for.

These people do not grasp the reality that Christ is waiting here to serve them in His Word and Sacrament; that Christ is here to treat each and every one of his chosen people, as His honored guest. Oh, if only they could see the Lord the way that Mary did! If only they could lift their eyes from all they have to do, and see how much the Lord is doing!

It is a high and exalted thing to sit where Mary sits, and much superior to what Martha has chosen. Jesus says as much this morning: "Mary has chosen what is better." You see, Jesus told the Twelve, the night of His betrayal when He gave His flesh and blood to them in bread and wine: "Which is the greater? He who sits at table, or He who serves? But I am among you as one who serves." When you go out to a fancy restaurant, is the person who fills your glass and brings your food superior to you? Or are you, the one your waiter waits upon the greater? Certainly, the person who is being waited on is greater. And so are you when Jesus waits upon you with his nail-scarred hands and nail-pierced feet. He lowers Himself to Martha's place and scrambles to prepare your Meal. He empties Himself of life itself that you may eat and drink your fill! You are the honored guest. He is your humble servant. He does all the work, and you receive His service!

That is what once happened for you on a cross, and that is what is happening this morning! You come, and Jesus serves you. He washes you with His forgiveness. He feeds you with His Word, and caters to your every need by giving you His Body and His Blood. There isn't any more exalted place than Mary's. It certainly is NOT the place of Martha, busying herself in preparation, scrambling to get the food upon the table.

I wouldn't be a bit surprised if some ladies here had on occasion missed part of a divine service where Christ ministers to us in His Word and Sacraments, because of some kitchen chores or meals or various tasks which just HAD TO BE DONE thereby depriving themselves of Christ's service to them. Or probably on more than one occasion a farmer has gone out into the field on the Lord's day or stayed in the field on Wednesday during Lent or Advent because it was just important to get the work done. Why? Probably

because they care, the women care about getting the job done right for others and the farmer cares about his family, loves them and wants to make a living to support them. Is that bad? It's just not best!

What we tend to forget and what Martha forgot was that Jesus had come himself to serve and not to be served. Although he willingly accepted the hospitality of his friends as long as he did not feel himself burdensome to them, yet he always came to them in order first to give to them and to give more than could be offered him in return. Martha saw Him too much as the recipient, too little as the giver; too much the object of her motherly care, too little the great Host who cares for us all. That's the point of Jesus' reply to her. He did not reprimand Martha for serving elaborately but for allowing her mind to be distracted and drawn away to things that were for the moment ---unimportant.

How many of God's people still have a thousand things to attend to and no quiet hour for the Scriptures, for prayer, or for coming to divine services where Christ can minister to them, where their cares can be stilled? Where all of those anxious thoughts and worries can, at least for a while, be laid aside and their souls ministered to, their fears put to rest and their troubled consciences told by Christ that their sins have been put away from them as far as the East is from the West.

God wants to come and feed you and put your cares to rest. God means it. ---Even as Christians, we can delude ourselves into thinking that we can get by, it won't hurt us to miss Bible class or Sunday morning Divine Services, just this once, but Jesus doesn't want it that way --he doesn't want you just getting by -- He wants to comfort you and he wants you to be certain of the salvation that you have because of your faith in His atoning work on the cross.

Christ would counsel his people to choose that part which is best, Christ would counsel us to follow Mary's example, as he gently counseled Martha. God encourages you to choose to come and hear God's word at every opportunity, allow God to strengthen you with His Holy Words, for you are one of His chosen children and he wants to give you his very best. His counsel to you is --avail yourself of those opportunities to be with Christ, set aside a period of time every day for the reading of His Word--He's there you know--Avail yourself of those opportunities for studying God's word--attend a Bible class where you can ask those probing questions, where you and your fellow believers can study Christ's words and grow in faith and knowledge of Christ and his work. And avail yourself at every opportunity to hear God's forgiveness pronounced to you in the absolution, of listening to the forgiveness of sins when God's grace and mercy is proclaimed to you in the Scripture readings and expounded in the sermon and avail yourself of God's richest blessings which he gives to each and every one of you when you partake of his very body and blood in the Supper He laid out for you. Follow the example of Mary and choose what is truly best.

Jesus does not want you doing for yourself this morning; He wants to do for you! Here, your Savior treats you like the honored guests you are, you are the ones that have been gathered from the roads and villages and assembled for the banquet.

Each one has his kitchen, each his Table, and the Lord's is here. There will be plenty of time for each of you to be the Savior's Martha; His instruments for bringing HIS love and service to the world. We can't be Mary's only. There is a place for being a Martha and she has it in your life each day. Wherever God has given you a neighbor, there you find your table, your kitchen, your place for giving out what God has given here. With His benediction later on this very morning, Jesus Christ will lift you to your feet, and send you out as Martha, humbling yourself in service to your neighbor as Christ Himself has served you here. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen