

Grow from the Inside-Out!

A sermon based on Luke 10:38-42

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I wanted to share some stats with you this morning for a few of our foreign missions. Since beginning in 1963 (so just over 50 years), the Lutheran Church of Central Africa, in Malawi, our sister synod, has grown to over 40,000 members. Since 2006 till now (less than ten years), our mission efforts in Pakistan, a nation surrounded by other Muslim-heavy nations, have yielded in over 44,000 Pakistanis have been enrolled in one of our Bible schools. In 2012 alone, there were over 100 baptisms and dozens of new communicant members in South Asia Lutheran Evangelical Mission, or SALEM, for short. You hear numbers like that, and you can't help but praise God for all this awesome growth for his name he's bringing throughout the world.

But at the same time, aren't you at least a little bit jealous? I mean, in these countries, some of which Christians are openly persecuted, even killed, and the gospel message is exploding over there? While here, we have freedom of religion, in general no one's going to hold a gun to my head if I wear a t-shirt or a piece of jewelry with a cross on it, and a lot of people you'll talk to will say they're Christians, and maybe we could call it a slow trickle of people coming into churches throughout the country.

Now, don't get me wrong, there are churches here growing exponentially. Some who are constantly running full Bible Information Classes. Where it seems every other Sunday, someone new is joining the church. But that's not us, not right now. And the temptations we have to struggle against is jealousy, frustration, doubt, don't we.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today, as we celebrate Mission Festival Sunday, we rejoice in the mission fields God has opened up, here and abroad. But friends, let's not get too far ahead of ourselves just yet. Yes, the harvest season is upon us, yes, there's a bounty to be had. But before we can go out, there's a different field we need to work on. It's here (in this congregation). It's here (in our hearts).

And here's the encouragement for our mission work...GROW FROM THE INSIDE OUT! And the only way it can happen is if you strive for the 'better' in here so you can give the 'best' out there.

Now, in our account, in our gospel, we have two completely different perspectives on what was "better." To Martha, it was a no-brainer. Her friend, Jesus, was coming over to the house for dinner, he was bringing along some of his friends, and well, if you've ever hosted a party or gathering before, you know how it goes. Nothing is ever good enough; everything has to be spick and span.

But this wasn't just anyone. It was Jesus, the Son of God. And I'm not so sure Martha could just hire some cleaning service and catering company to make everything perfect. There was a lot of work that needed to be done, and there weren't a lot of people to help out. So, it was just Martha and...

Well, it was just Martha. You see, Mary took a different approach. I'm not so sure Mary ever once thought, "If I just sit here and listen to Jesus, that will get me out of helping with the dishes or setting the table." But, again, this was Jesus, the Son of God. What could be better than sitting at his feet, hanging on his every word?

Truthfully? Nothing. And Jesus himself said as much, “Martha, you’re worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better.”

It was just like Jesus. He didn’t need all the stops pulled out for him. He was there for them, and what he had for them was far better than any extravagant five-course meal or a spotless house they could provide for him (not that those were bad things). What he had for them was the one thing they needed to grow, and Mary got that, and he wasn’t going to take it away from her

Several years ago, a highly respected pastor, in giving a presentation, shared a story (I think he was humbly talking about himself) about how a young pastor, assigned to his first congregation, went there, and for the first five years, all he did was get into members’ homes, encourage faithful worship attendance, preach good sermons, teach good Bible Classes.

Didn’t worry about canvassing, having outreach events, setting up programs to help out the community. I’m sure they weren’t turning aside visitors. And I’m sure efforts were met by some resistance, from those who wanted to do more. But do you see what his focus was? Before letting his people out into the community, into those bountiful harvest fields, to serve, he wanted to get them into God’s Word because there was a different seed needing to be cultivated, their own...their own seed of faith in Jesus.

He got it. He understood how much better it was for the congregation’s ultimate success if every member was growing in their faith in Jesus and growing in their understanding and acceptance of what their function as servants of Christ was. Only then was it time to unleash them into the world. The pastor didn’t tell us how the whole experience ended up, but you can imagine.

Do you wonder if maybe that’s been one of our weaknesses? Again, not that there’s anything wrong with outreach events, helping out in the community, things of that nature. But are we sometimes getting ahead of ourselves? Are we sometimes more eager to grow from the outside in, instead of striving for what’s ‘better’ in here, in our congregation, and in here, in our hearts.

What I mean is this: have we become too focused on growing the numbers of our church, finding ways to do that, rather than growing the members of our church, missing the most obvious mission field we have right in front of us?

I get it, there’s a certain appeal and excitement that comes when we see new faces, when the pews are getting fuller little by little. I won’t lie, I certainly enjoy it. But is it coming at a cost at the mission field in here (the congregation)? Out of a membership of close to 90, we have on an average Sunday around 40-50 people in worship, probably consisting of about 30-40 members. Who do you think needs Jesus? And thinking along the lines of, “Pastor, you should be doing more work with our delinquents” doesn’t fly because, yes, there’s always more I can be doing, but remember, this is your church, this is your family, and you get to join me in being your brothers and sisters’ keeper, being concerned about their relationship with Jesus.

Friends, I get it, it’s fun to get out into our community, or to put on something that’s geared towards them. I won’t lie, getting name recognition out there and building relationships with the people out there is a great feeling. But what about when that comes at the expense of what’s ‘better,’ working on the mission field in here (our hearts) and growing in our faith in Jesus by growing in God’s Word? When we’ve become so focused on our service that we forget the motivation behind it and de-prioritize the one thing that enables us to serve as God wants us to, his Word?

In other words, have we become Martha? You notice what our text says? She was so “distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.” The Greek word translated here as “preparations” also means “service/ministry.” Martha was so focused on her serving Jesus that she was missing out on being served by him. Her service was a distraction.

Is that you? That’s me sometimes. The temptation is to become so engrossed with serving others, filling them up, we neglect being filled up by Jesus and the “one thing needed...what is better,” his Word.

A commentary I read about this section of Scripture had this to say “A service that bypasses the Word is one that will never have lasting character.” Be like Martha, be so focused on serving others to grow outside while failing to serve yourself and growing on the inside, missing out on that precious mission field of you (as a congregation and as an individual believer), you work towards something that won’t last. It can’t last because it’s missing the one thing needed.

Friends, imagine the harvest field Jesus had to work with. An entire world, thousands of years filled with sinners of all shapes and sizes, including you and me. He didn’t just give us what was ‘better.’ He gave us his best. He gave us the one thing needed. He gave us himself.

For all the times we’ve failed to serve ourselves with what’s ‘better’ and fill ourselves up on God’s Word before serving others, Jesus has filled us with his forgiveness, with his mercy, with his love. His life, his death, his resurrection were all about you and me and every single person and giving us the one thing needed to get into God’s good favor and to have a place in heaven...himself and his perfect life. Because Jesus lived, died, and rose, he’s covered us in his righteousness and assures us even today it will not be taken away from us. Friends, nothing’s better than that.

Well, except maybe his Word. After all, Scripture is where Jesus announces this good news to us so many times, in so many ways. He knows it’s something we can’t ever have enough of. He knows it’s what we need to grow from the inside out.

Now, don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing wrong with being like Martha in the sense that she had a heart for service. She wanted to give her best to Jesus. There’s nothing wrong with looking for ways to serve those people in our community. After all, today is Mission Festival Sunday, and we’re celebrating the harvest fields that are just waiting out there.

But, before we can get out there, we need to grow in here first. We need to strive for the ‘better’ in here. Now, at first hearing, it might sound selfish and self-focused...“take care of yourself before others.”

But we can understand it in the right way. A person who’s dealing with depression, guilt, anger, you know, problems that are tearing them up on the inside, you can tell a noticeable change in who they are on the outside once they work through those feelings and come to a certain sense of peace. A common response you might hear is, “My, I can tell how much you’ve grown through this experience.”

When we strive for what’s ‘better’ in here (first in our own hearts and then as a congregation), when we are so full of God’s Word of grace and truth, when we’re continually growing in our faith in Jesus, friends, that’s when we’re prepared to give the “best” out there, in the mission fields you and I are in each and every day.

When we sit like Mary at the feet of Jesus and fill ourselves up on his Word, then we're ready to go out like Martha and start serving others, understanding our goal is not just to meet their physical needs, but to open doors to share Jesus and meet their greatest need for a Savior.

When you have people in a third world African country who have been filled to the brim with the good news of Jesus' grace and what it means for them, you can't help but be in awe at their willingness to give what little they have in talents and treasures to build a clean water tank for their entire village with the anticipation that they'll get to share the living water with those who are thirsting.

When you have missionaries in China who understand Jesus' command to "go" and are eager to serve, you rejoice that they're willing to spend time with the natives, helping them practice their English, all the while sharing Jesus with them, too, even with the very real risk of being caught by a government that has forbidden Christianity from being openly shared.

When you have members here whose hearts have been set on fire by the Holy Spirit and are being continually stoked by God's Word on a regular basis, that's when we are ready to give the 'best,' to give Christ to our community.

You know, we might not be growing leaps and bounds here member-wise, but we have in place the opportunities for growing leaps and bounds spiritual-wise.

And when this harvest field is taken care of, when the growing on the inside takes place, the result is growth on the outside, both as a believer and as a family of believers, spiritually and physically. It's inevitable. Sit at Jesus' feet, and he encourages, enables, and equips us to take the best out there, and then who knows what blessings he has for us, individually and as a family of believers. But he knows.

Light of the World...a place to gather and grow in God's Word so we can go and glow with the love of Christ. This Mission Festival Sunday, that's our mission statement. Friends, rejoice that Jesus has given you what you needed in his love, his forgiveness, his Word. And now, let this be your mission, strive for the 'better' in here and in here so we can take the 'best' out there. And as you do, watch for the outside to grow. It will! Amen.