My sermon this morning can be thought of as an early Reformation Sunday sermon. Come Reformation Sunday, toward the end of October, we get to deal with great Biblical themes, including justification by faith, courage in face of immense danger, and a sanctified life. Likewise, this morning’s Gospel Lesson draws me on toward a Reformation theme. I am speaking of our conviction that good works follow from faith. Here it is, the middle of summer, rather far away from Reformation Sunday, but I believe this morning’s Bible reading invites us to recommit ourselves to the idea that good works follow from faith. In the course of developing this idea, I hope to defend both of these ladies – both Mary and Martha – but to be true to the Bible in giving priority to Mary. What we need, what this whole world could really use from us, is that we will be a kind of blessed mixture of both Mary and Martha. That will be the best thing for us and for our neighbors, that we should combine both Mary and Martha in our souls and in our deeds.

Let us begin by noting that Jesus does not reject Martha, nor her good deeds of service. He defends Mary, but he does not thereby reject Martha. St. Ambrose\(^1\) expresses this point well:

> Virtue does not have a single form. In the example of Martha and Mary, there is added the busy devotion of the one [Martha] and the pious attention of the other to the word of God [Mary]... Nor is Martha rebuked in her good serving, but Mary is preferred because she has chosen the better part for herself... (Ambrose, Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.85-86.)

Why is this? Why is it that Mary has chosen the better part? Well, some of the church fathers believed that Mary had chosen the better part because loving the word of the Lord will endure into eternity, but our busyness shall not. St. Augustine\(^2\) has some lovely words about this:

> At present alleluia is for us a traveler’s song, but this tiresome journey brings us closer to home and rest where, all our busy

\(^{1}\) St. Ambrose, c. 340–397, Bishop of Milan.

\(^{2}\) St. Augustine, 354 – 430, Bishop of Hippo, in north Africa.
activities over and done with, the only thing that will remain will be hallelujahs. That is the delightful part that Mary chose for herself, as she sat doing nothing but learning and praising, while her sister, Martha, was busy with all sorts of things. Indeed, what she was doing was necessary, but it wasn’t going to last. (Augustine, Sermon 255. 1-2.)

I bet this is true. I bet that our hallelujahs will endure into eternity. I am not so sure that all of our busy activities will come to an end, because, after all, even Adam and Eve in their state of perfection in the garden, still had good work to do. However that may be, I think St. Augustine is right that Mary’s devotion to Jesus will continue through all eternity.

But in this sermon I want to suggest another reason why Mary has chosen the better part. I am not denying that she has chosen the part that will last, but what I want to lift up especially is that she has chosen the part that comes first. As the Reformation saying puts it, good works follow from faith. Faith produces good works. Our Lord Jesus uses the analogy of the tree and its fruit. He puts it this way:

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit. (Matthew 7:17, KJV)

It is a matter of first things first. We need to be a good tree so that we can produce good fruit. We need to give ourselves wholly to Jesus. Then we will produce good deeds. It is unavoidable. We cannot give ourselves wholly to Jesus and then sit around like a bump on a log. That is not following Jesus, but rather departing from him, falling behind as he goes onwards in his life and love.

And so my idea is that Mary has chosen the better part simply because she has chosen the part that nourishes us for a good and holy life. And apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. It is as Jesus says in John 15:5:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5, RSV)

Indeed, apart from Jesus and his ways, even our attempts at love could well go astray. We think we are showing love, but we are not, because we have not sat long enough at the feet of Jesus. Mary is to be praised because she is abiding in Jesus. She is sitting right at his feet and cherishing his words. But if we could see the next scene in her life, we might well find her tending the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, and clothing the destitute.
Such good things would be appropriate for Mary, for her faith should produce good deeds.

Our Lutheran ancestors had a dickens of a time trying to explain to the Roman Catholic authorities that we Lutherans believe in good works. We do good deeds, but I fear that to this very day, Catholics believe that our theology does not support our good deeds. But of course it does! Our Lutheran theology is a Biblical theology, and so we believe in good deeds with all our hearts.

So the Lutheran reformers tried to be as straightforward and as blunt as they could be in standing up for the necessity of a good and holy life. Early on in the Augsburg Confession, for example, the reformers agreed with and affirm the ancient doctrine that our faith should and must yield good works. Article 6, then, begins this way:

It is also taught [among us Lutherans] that such faith should yield good fruit and good works and that a person must do such good works as God has commanded ... [VI. Concerning the New Obedience]

You can almost hear the frustration in the reformers when they speak of the accusations of their opponents. In Article 20, for example, we read this:

Our people are falsely accused of prohibiting good works. But their writings concerning the Decalogue and other writings demonstrate that they have given good and useful account and admonition concerning proper Christian walks of life and works, about which little had been taught before our time. ([XX.] Concerning Faith and Good Works)

Later, in that same article, the Reformers make the good pastoral point that often the human heart is “too weak” to do good deeds. If we do not have Jesus in our lives, often the good and right thing seems just too hard for us — too dangerous. But if we have given ourselves to Jesus, trusting him, then we can bravely go forward. And so, this article Concerning Faith and Good Works ends this way:

That is why this teaching [our Lutheran teaching] concerning faith is not to be censured for prohibiting good works. On the contrary, it should be praised for teaching the performance of good works and for offering help as to how they may be done. For without faith and without Christ human nature and human power are much too weak to do good works: such as to call on God, to have patience in suffering, to love the neighbor, to engage diligently in legitimate callings, to be obedient, to avoid evil lust, etc. Such lofty and genuine
works cannot be done without the help of Christ, as he himself says in John 15:5: “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

The good thing about Mary, then, is that she is not apart from Jesus. She sits at his feet and cherishes his words. She can be expected, then, to be a brave doer of good in this world, like her sister Martha.

Martin Luther could write most tenderly of how good deeds follow from faith. Do you remember what he said about the poor servant girl who does as she is told? I have lifted up this passage before, I admire it so much. Luther writes this:

It seems to me that we shall have our hands full to keep these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love toward enemies, chastity, kindness, etc., and all that is involved in doing so. But such works are not important or impressive in the eyes of the world. They are not uncommon and showy, reserved to certain special times, places, rites, and ceremonies, but are common, everyday domestic duties of one neighbor to another, with nothing glamorous about them. Those other deeds captivate all eyes and ears. Aided by great splendor, expense, and magnificent buildings, they are so adorned that everything gleams and glitters. There is burning of incense, singing and ringing of bells, lighting of candles and tapers until for all of this nothing else can be seen or heard. For when a priest stands in a golden chasuble, or a layperson spends a whole day in the church on his or her knees, that is considered a precious work that cannot be sufficiently extolled. But when a poor servant girl takes care of a little child or faithfully does what she is told, this is regarded as nothing. (Luther, Large Catechism, Conclusion of the Ten Commandments)

I bet that many of us could write tenderly about people who have put their faith into action — who have gotten up from their knees listening to Jesus and gone on to work at the work that needs to be done in this world.

This is the time of year, for example, when the work preparing for our Vacation Bible School is reaching a crescendo. When many of us are preoccupied with the sports page or with public deeds that bring us praise, Karen and Jean, for example, are downstairs in our undercroft, quietly thinking out and arranging things for our Vacation Bible School for the little children of our neighborhood.

I think of all the faithful sons and daughters, husbands and wives in our congregation who have cared for ailing relatives or neighbors — sometimes for long stretches of time. I am filled with awe before the daily deeds of our people in cooking the meals, cleaning the home, teaching the little ones,
helping them to grow up right. I am touched by the people who get up in the morning, have breakfast, and head off to work, trying to earn a living for themselves and for others. I admire the construction workers and police and firefighters and home health attendants and all those people who accept danger and exhaustion in the course of doing their jobs. I admire and I am awfully grateful for the generations of Christians in this place who heard our faith concerning Jesus and then turned around and built this church and all of you who have built good lives in our city.

Our story would not be complete without both Mary and Martha. Mary misunderstands the Jesus she loves if she does not get up and do good deeds in this world. And Martha is likely to grow weary, or withdraw in fear, or simply get love wrong if she does not join her sister on her knees listening to Jesus.

We are doing step one right here and now: We are kneeling before Jesus here in church, in Word and Sacrament. We are playing our role as Mary. As we leave this place, we must play Martha too, for she too is an important example for us and is cherished by the one who cherishes us too, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.