

Theme: The “One Thing” Needed (20/7/25)

Text: Col 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42

My recent visit to Tonga will be remembered for a long time. Especially to attend at the Methodist Annual Conference after my last attendance 30 years ago. The Conference was held at Ha’apai, the third group of Islands and the smallest District of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. Apparently, at Lifuka the principal island of the Ha’apai group, Captain Cook gave the name: “Friendly Island” in his third visit to Tonga in 1777, because of the overflowing hospitality he received there. That was 20 years before the first Christian missionary team arrived in Tonga. At the Conference in June, I just couldn’t believe what I had seen – the overflowing hospitality, not only the amount of food that was shipped from other islands and offered for each meal, but the gifts that the people of Ha’apai had prepared to give away to their guests. Particularly, when the weather was overwhelmingly wet and with consistent gale warnings.

Though hospitality is exceedingly important in the Biblical world in general, it could also be purely cultural. Today’s story of Martha and Mary in Luke’s gospel, helps us to see how essential hospitality is in our service of others, as well as our service for the Lord Jesus. Let us look closely at our story in two parts:

1. A warning about distraction and worry (38-40)

Today’s familiar story of Martha and Mary leads us to reflect upon our busy schedules and how we see it from both the worldly perspective and Jesus’ perspective. We were told in the previous chapter (9:51), that Jesus’ mind was set for Jerusalem. He preached and taught about the Kingdom of God, healed the sick, and performed miracles as he and his disciples went south. Now in verse 38, as they were on their way, Jesus came to a village where a ‘woman named Martha opened her home to him.’ It was the older sister’s role to take the place of the mother in hosting guests and entertaining them. We know through the

gospels that Jesus was not a stranger, but a dear friend of the family of Bethany.

It does not matter how many times we read this story, most of us often sympathize with Martha. We are allowed to protest and question Jesus in this story as Job and Habakkuk did in questioning God's justice and fairness – How can you encourage such an irresponsible act of Mary? Surely, there is time for hearing God's word and worshiping him, but this is not the time for it. We have guests to attend to – food to cook and serve, table to set up and so on and so forth. The house is going to be in a mess if we all assemble at the feet of our guests and no food for supper. This is the reality if no one takes up Martha's role.

Of course, we know that Mary is supposed to be our main focus in this story, not Martha. But forgive me Jesus, why do you shift quickly to Mary's place which is against the tradition that only male pupils sit at the feet of the Rabbi? Why do you obsess about being, but not doing, about sitting, listening and learning instead of serving? Somebody has to get this stuff done. We can't be reading and listening to sermons all day. Your family – parents and children, brothers and sisters need you. They need your time, care, service and companionship. Mary's decision and action might be better in a personal retreat, but not as a way of life.

However, we cannot deny that Martha had done a great and not an evil task. It isn't like being glued to her phone or going through Facebook and so on. She was serving. She cared for the household guests. She did the right and most sensible things for anybody hosted. We need *Marthas* in the family household and also in the Church family. We need hard working people – someone has to serve morning tea, do the dishes, stack up the chairs, preheat the oven so that the *Marys* would attend at the feet of the Master for their spiritual devotion and growth.

Then here comes the twist – Martha ³⁹*had a sister called Mary, who set at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.* Obviously, Martha did nothing wrong in working hard for Jesus. But her passion to do well in serving distracted her heart from Jesus.

Friends, it is easy to concentrate on what we do even for the sake of others and for the glory of God, and criticize those who do less or nothing at all. Martha wanted Jesus to approve what she was doing by getting her little sister to help her in serving. While serving is important – the time spend for reflection and communion with God is ultimately more valuable. We can be overwhelmed by the demand of our daily lives and forget to examine our priorities and ensure that our spiritual needs for growth are met. Martha expects Jesus to understand her trouble, but Jesus sees things differently.

2. The one thing needed (41-42)

Twice Jesus calls her by name, ⁴¹*“Martha, Martha!”* We can sense the love, not rebuking, we can sense the warning not degrading in the voice of Jesus. We are told in John's gospel that ‘Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary and Lazarus’ (Jn 11:5). Jesus loved the whole family and Martha was a kind host who took her hospitality seriously. It does not sound that Jesus was angry with Martha. He wanted her to see what her little sister sees. ⁴¹*Martha, Martha! You are worried and upset about many things.* The *Marthas* (us and the people of the Ha'apai Conference included) want to serve the Lord for the best of our abilities but forget and often do not know how to add the one thing much needed.

The Bible speaks of the one thing: ***‘One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life...’*** (Ps 27:4);

*When Jesus heard this (from the rich young ruler), he said to him, “You still lack **one thing**...come follow me”* (Luke 18:22);

*Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But **one thing** I do; Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. I press on towards the goal to win the price to which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:13-14).*

The “One Thing” needed emphasizes that the relationship with God is the most important aspect of life. Friends, is this how you understand it to be? Is this what you are striving for? Mary chose this one thing needed – this was to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his Word. This means attending to your guest – welcoming his every word. This is essential and it is in the heart of true hospitality.

Friends, to sit at the feet of Jesus implies readiness to hear and learn his every word. To sit at the feet of Jesus implies surrender and submission to his instructions. To sit at the feet of Jesus implies faith and trust in who He is. To sit at the feet of Jesus implies that we are His disciples ready to be send. To sit at the feet of Jesus implies that we trust and hope in His future provision and future direction for His church.

The message to take home in this passage is simple: while service for the Lord is important, the time spent in spiritual reflection and communion with Him is ultimately more valuable. Do not be obsessed on external tasks and neglect your daily devotion and relationship with the Lord. It all begins at the feet of Jesus – discipleship, revival and spiritual growth. We may go there with Mary to hear Jesus’ word and learn from Him, and afterwards we may serve others in the Lord’s name with Martha.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, we desire to be faithful to all You command us to do. We pray that we would choose the better part and sit at Your feet, day by day, so that our spirit may be refreshed and our soul revived. We pray that as we are filled by You, we may be used as vessels to pour out Your love to others, for Your praise and glory. In Jesus' name we pray, **Amen.***