Luke Lesson 45 (2020)

**AT THE FEET OF JESUS**

Luke 10:38-42

Key Verse: 10:42

“But few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

During this time of the coronavirus pandemic, we face many challenges every day. However, we give thanks to God for his mercy, especially for many healthcare professionals and other essential work forces, who fight against the invisible enemy and care for those who are infected and sick, risking their own lives. Surely, they are unsung heroes who deserve our recognition and continual support. May the Lord bless and protect them.

A few weeks ago, through the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we learned the importance of loving our neighbor as evidence of loving God. The event in today’s passage is unique and does not appear in any other gospel narratives. Obviously, the author Luke had a special interest in it because it reveals an essential teaching, regarding the top priority of Christian life, particularly that of loving God.

Last week, I was debating in my mind if I should deliver the Sunday message based on this passage, because I was not sure what this passage can teach us, when most of us are stuck at home. During the week, Missionary James S. Kim, who will be delivering next Sunday’s message, texted me, asking about the passage I was going to prepare for this Sunday. I responded, “*Well, I am not sure. But most likely it would be Luke’s gospel and it’s not finalized.”* And he texted me back, “*Okay, may God inspire you.”* But then I realized that there is an important spiritual lesson we all can learn in this passage. Through today’s passage, I pray that we may learn what the top priority of our life of faith should be, especially during this time of pandemic crisis.

Look at verse 38. “As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.” At that time, Jesus and his disciples were heading toward Jerusalem. It would be his last trip to Jerusalem where he would face suffering, rejection and death in order to fulfill God’s will for the salvation of the world. Jesus, knowing it would be a great challenge to his disciples, had been repeatedly telling them concerning his suffering and death, so that they could be prepared. Yet, they would not listen to him because of fear.

As they were traveling toward Jerusalem, they came to a village where Martha opened her home to him. Luke did not mention the name of the village. But we know it was a small town called Bethany, located about 2 miles from Jerusalem (Jn. 11:1). Martha also had a sister, named Mary and a brother, called Lazarus (Jn. 11:2; 12:1-3). It seems that Martha was the oldest among them. By the time, their parents might have passed away. In the absence of their parents, there was a bond of love between Jesus and these three. Jesus loved them dearly, and they too loved the Lord. As Jesus arrived in village, Martha opened her home to Jesus. Surely, Martha, as the eldest, had a strong sense of responsibility. She was the woman with a big heart. It seems that she also had a pretty big house, which could accommodate not just Jesus but also his 12 disciples, possibly even more. Martha wanted to please and serve Jesus and his disciples. After briefly greeting with Jesus, Martha quickly went back to the kitchen and began preparing special meal for the guests. A lot of work to be done. Normally, cooking for guests in most cultures was women’s job. Certainly, Mary, her sister, was supposed to help her too. But did she? No.

Then what was she doing? Look at verse 39. “She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.” While Martha was busy with all the cooking, besides setting up tables, putting dishes, cups, utensils, etc., Mary was sitting at the feet of the Lord Jesus. Her sitting at the Lord’s feet indicates her position or attitude as a learner of Christ. What was she doing at the feet of Jesus? Was she washing Jesus’ feet? No. She was listening to what the Lord was saying.

The imperfect tense of the verb “listening” indicates her continuous attention to Jesus’ words. Listening is a difficult work. At that time, Jesus’ disciples were reluctant to listen to what Jesus had to say to them because they were afraid, and Martha was too busy to listen to him. In fact, even though many people hung around Jesus, nobody was really listening to what Jesus had to say to them. But Mary was. She was listening to what Jesus said and apparently treasuring them in her hearts. As she listened to Jesus’ words, all her worries and anxiety were replaced with peace and joy, her soul was revived, her faith was edified, and her spirit grew strong. By listening to his words, Mary expressed her true love and respect for the Lord. It was her act of worship. How lovely she was! In fact, she unintentionally displayed the attitude of a true believer in Christ.

Look at verse 40. “But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, ‘Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” We can tell that Martha was fuming inside. Martha had too much to do. It seemed that dinner would be delayed, which will be embarrassing, unless she could get help from someone, especially her sister Mary. When she thought about Mary who left her to do all the work by herself and sat at Jesus’ feet, she really did not like it. She became critical of her, thinking *“Oh, my. She was so selfish and lazy and has no sense. After all, who does she think she is? She is a woman who should be cooking right now.”*

Understandable. It is true Martha needed help, but Mary did not help her at all. So, Martha could have approached Mary and said, *“Mary, I really need your help. Can you help me, please?”* But she did not and could not. Why not? First, she was too angry to say it nicely to her sister. Second, she realized that it was the Lord who allowed Mary to sit at his feet and listen to his words endlessly. Most of the orthodox Jewish Rabbi would not allow any women to sit at their feet and listen to them. Martha thought that Jesus was doing wrong with her sister Mary. So, now her anger turned to Jesus. She complained, almost rebuked him, by saying “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” She lost her temper-tantrum in front of all her guests. What an offense she made toward the Lord Jesus!

How did Jesus respond to her complain? Look at verse 41. “‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things,” If someone was getting angry at us, our immediate reaction would be something like this, *“Why are you so angry? You are wrong! You should behave better than that, okay?”* If Jesus said it to Martha in that way, it would have made Martha even more upset. But Jesus did not do that. Instead, Jesus first acknowledged Martha’s presence by calling her name twice, with deep respect and empathy, “Martha, Martha.” Then he validated her anger by saying, “You are worried and upset about many things.” The Lord Jesus was saying to Martha, *“You are right, my dear. You should be angry and upset about what was happening around you.”* Here, we see that Jesus was fully human who could understand and acknowledge Martha’s frustration and anger.

I am sure that Martha had calmed down a bit. And now Martha might have expected Jesus to tell Mary to get up and help her sister. But did he do that? No. Look at verse 42. “But few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” The phrase “But few things are needed – or indeed only one” is a little unclear. Some other English translations phrase it as “one thing is needed” (ESV) or “only one thing is necessary” (NASB). What did Jesus mean by “only one thing is necessary”? Was he saying that he preferred one dish to multiple dishes? Or was he referring to one spiritual goal? We are not 100% sure.

Look at verse 42 again. “But few things are needed, or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” The Lord Jesus surely did not undermine Martha’s genuine desire to show her love for him. However, it is obvious in Jesus’ remarks that Martha’s choice was not the best as Jesus’ disciple, doing a lot of things for the Lord, which eventually led her to bitterness and anger. It was Mary who made a better choice than Martha to show her love and respect to the Lord by paying full attention to his words, sitting at his feet. To Jesus, Mary was neither selfish, lazy nor senseless. She was an exemplary disciple of Jesus. According to Jesus, what Mary had chosen would not be taken away from her. She will continue to grow in faith and love for the Lord. She would become the most beautiful person God wanted her to be.

This teaches us that the essence of Christian life or our worship is not about doing many things. It is about our personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. We can have this personal relationship with the Lord by doing a lot of things for him but simply by listening to him, drawing strength and wisdom from him. This reminds us of what Jesus said to his disciples in John 15:5, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Someone said that nothing can be as damaging to the Christian life as trying to work hard for Christ without taking time to commune with him. Listening to Jesus should be the top priority of all his disciples. This reminds us of 1 Samuel 15:22b, which states, “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many of us are staying home and we have not seen each other face-to-face for many weeks. I miss our Sunday worship services at our center, with beautiful and uplifting songs of praises. One of the things I also miss is our Sunday lunch fellowship after our services. The food at our lunch is delicious and healthy. I believe that it is at least Flushing’s best. Mostly our women coworkers work extremely hard to make the best food with lots of prayer and love. Even though their husbands sometimes help them, all the credit goes to the ladies. But if our church is only full of Mary-s and no Martha-s, we will not have lunch any longer even when our center is re-opened to our altogether worship services. We surely need both Martha-s and Mary-s who genuinely love the Lord. But even the highest priority for Martha-s should be not cooking but listening to the words of the Lord.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, most of our lives were so busy and uptight that even if they wanted to read and study the Bible and pray more, it was hard. But now, I see that most of us who are staying home have a lot of time to spare. One of the good things I hear is that many of us are being connected, through internet and social media, to read the Scripture and share testimonies and pray together. This is good. Praise the Lord! The coronavirus pandemic is an unprecedented challenge for all of us, physically, emotionally and economically. I hope and pray that it will end soon. However, when we think of it from a different perspective, it is a golden opportunity for us to grow as more beautiful and mature disciples of Jesus Christ. Yet, it will not happen automatically.

Just as Mary did, we also need to spend time at the feet of Christ and listen to his words, either through Bible reading and meditation of God’s words and prayers. Having said that, honestly, I admit that sitting alone with the Lord in silence is challenging for me. I am often distracted by many ideas of doing something better and more productive. I am also distracted by my smartphone and social media. Young parents with growing children who are staying home 24/7 have even tougher challenges to be able to sit quietly at the feet of Jesus. It may be tolerable to be stuck at home one or two weeks. Since it has been already 5-6 weeks, it is becoming more challenging. Some of us might feel isolated and even depressed, like self-imposed exiles. Surely, it is not an easy time for any of us to go through this tunnel. We surely need to support one another. Couples can discuss about this issue and arrange their schedule so that they can find true comfort from the Lord during this challenging time.

We do not know how long this pandemic will last. Many experts are saying that it will last longer than we expect. I hope not. But what we need is not necessary a hurried attempt to alleviate our discomfort. What we need is to develop perseverance. Romans 5:3-4 states “We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.” (NLT) In the NIV, the word “endurance” is translated as “perseverance”. In fact, the words “endurance” and “perseverance” have similar meaning. Both mean to overcome difficulties and hardships. But they are also different. Perseverance is overcoming difficulties with hope whereas endurance is just tolerating difficulties with human strength. It is hard to endure, and it is also hard to persevere. But the results are difficult. When we endure hardship without meaning or purpose, we tend to despair and become bitter. But when we persevere with purpose and hope, we become better and more mature.

King David is known as a man after God’s own heart and the shadow of the Messiah in the Old Testament. He did not become such a wonderful person automatically. He had many problems and trials, some caused by his enemies and others by his own mistakes and bad decisions. But in all trials and problems, when he persevered in hope, he became a wonderful person in God. He confessed in Psalm 27:4 which states, “One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to see him in his temple.”

There are many negative sides of the coronavirus. Honestly, it can be terrifying. But we, as disciples of Jesus, our current hardships and difficulties can be a golden opportunity to become more beautiful, mature and genuine persons in Christ Jesus, if we persevere all of these in Christ. Due to the corona pandemic, our activities are limited, including in our Sunday worship services. But one thing we learn through this is that the heart of worship is not doing many things. The core of our life of faith is our relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. In today’s passage, Jesus expressed that he was pleased by the choice Mary had made. He said that she has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. During this time of crisis, may we be more like Mary, spending time alone with the Lord in prayer and meditation of his words. And I believe that our inner person would become more beautiful and mature in Christ Jesus than ever, and it will not be taken away from us.