

February 16, 2020

*"The Shoemaker"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 25:35-40

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Since Valentine's Day is all about love, well, what's better than for us to hear a story that epitomizes love. It's actually one I've shared with you before years ago, but I think it's so practical and powerful in the message it conveys, that it bears repeating. First, though, I want to put the story in perspective. For consider what our Lord Jesus said when asked what was the greatest commandment. The greatest commandment he said is, "To love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." So I'm going to read you one of my favorite short stories, which I've used my pastoral license to condense and edit. It's by Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, entitled, *"Where Love is, There is God Also."* So sit back and revel in the beauty of this story and what it is telling you.

In a city lived Martin Adievitch, a shoemaker. He lived in a basement apartment, in one small room with only one window. A window which looked out onto the street. And through that window he watched people passing by, though he could see only their feet. Yet by their boots he could recognize their owners. You see, he had lived long in this place and had many acquaintances. Few pair of boots in his neighborhood had not been in his hands once or twice. Martin had plenty to do because he was an excellent workman, used good material, and did not charge exorbitant prices. But as Martin Adievitch grew old, he began to think more and more about the state of his soul and became somewhat bitter.

You see, Martin's wife had died some years ago. And all his children died in their childhood. So Martin was alone and fell into despair. So deep was this despair that he complained to God. Martin fell into such a melancholy state, that more than once he prayed for death, and he reproached God for all the suffering in his life. One day a dear friend came to see Martin, and Martin talked openly with him and began to complain about all his sufferings. "I have no more desire to live," he said. "I only wish to be dead. That is all I pray from God. I am a man without anything to hope for now." And his old friend said to him, "You don't talk right Martin. We must not judge God's doing. The world moves, not by your will, but by God's will. You are in despair because you wish to live for your own happiness." "But what else shall one live for?" asked Martin. His friend replied, "We must live for God, Martin. He gives you life and for His sake you must live. When you live for Him, you will not grieve over anything, and your life will seem easy to you." Martin kept silent for a while and then said, "But how can one live for God?" To which his friend said, "Jesus Christ has taught us how to live for God. You know how to read don't you? Buy a Bible and read the New Testament. There you will learn how to live for God. Everything is explained there. Everything!"

These words began to kindle a fire in Martin's heart. And shortly thereafter he purchased a Bible in large print and began to read. It so cheered his soul that he read every day. At times he would become so absorbed in reading the Gospels that all the kerosene in his lamp would burn out. But the more he read, the clearer he understood what God wanted of him and how he should live for God by becoming more like Jesus Christ. And the burden he carried on his heart, began to get lighter and lighter. Before, when he laid down to sleep at night, he would sigh and groan. But now when he went to bed he repeated again and again, "Praise and thanksgiving to you, Oh God. Glory and honor to you, Oh Lord. Thy will be done." And from that time on Martin's whole life changed.

Now it happened that Martin read late into the night the Gospel of Luke, where a rich Pharisee desired that Jesus might visit with him and eat with him. And he read how a woman that was a sinner anointed Jesus feet, and washed them with her tears, and how Jesus then forgave her of all her sins. Jesus turned to the Pharisee and said, "See this woman?" "I entered into your house and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has washed them with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. You gave me no kiss, but this woman since the time I came in has not ceased to kiss my feet." And Martin thought to himself, "That Pharisee had to have been such a man as I am. He thinks only of himself, but for his guest, the Lord Himself, he cares nothing at all. If Jesus came into my house, would I have done the same as the Pharisee? Or would I show him the same kind of love that the woman showed him?"

As he pondered these questions Martin fell deeply asleep at his table. But after a while, Martin was startled from his sleep by the words, "Martin, Martin, it is I." Martin stood up and looked around and saw nothing except the Bible on this table. "Could it have been Christ calling to me?" He glanced around further... no one. Finally, going to bed, he again plainly heard, "Martin, Martin, look tomorrow on the street, for I am coming to your house." Martin arose from his bed and began to rub his eyes. He was not sure whether he heard those words in a dream, or if they were real. At daybreak the next morning, Martin got up, said his prayers to God, lit the stove, put on the cabbage soup and the porridge, put some water in the kettle, put on his apron, and set down by the window to work. But as he began working, at the same time he was thinking about what had happened the night before. Would Christ really come to his house?

After a while, Martin looked up and saw the old street sweeper Stepanovitch shoveling snow from the sidewalk. Stepanovitch was an old broken down man and no longer had the strength to shovel snow. Martin thought to himself, "I'll give him some tea, the kettle must be boiling by now." Martin poured the tea, and tapped with his finger at the glass. Stepanovitch turned and came to the window. Martin

beckoned him to come in, "Warm yourself a little, you must be cold." Stepanovitch came in and shook off the snow and tried to wipe his feet but staggered. "Don't trouble to wipe your feet I will clean it up myself, sit down." And he handed a cup of tea to his guest. Stepanovitch enjoyed the moment, and held the warm drink. When he finished drinking his tea he turned the cup upside down, as was the custom, and began to express his thanks and take his leave. But it was really evident he wanted to stay and have more tea. "Have some more," Martin said. "Drink more for your good health." And in taking some pity on his friend, Martin told his friend the good news of Jesus Christ. How Jesus disdained no one and loved the simple and humble people. "He even picked his disciples from among the likes of us, sinners like ourselves, from the working class. And he said, 'Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself, shall be exalted. You call me Lord,' says Jesus, 'and I will wash your feet. Whoever wishes to be first must be a servant to all. Blessed are the poor, the humble, the generous and the merciful.'" Listening to the words of Jesus, old Stepanovitch forgot about his tea. He was sitting listening, and the tears began rolling down his face. "Thank you, Martin Adieavitch," he said, "for satisfying me in both body and in soul."

Stepanovitch departed and Martin sat down again by the window to work. Still hoping for Christ to come to his house. After a time there came by the window a woman in torn stockings and worn out shoes. She stopped and stood against the building. Martin looked up at her from the window, and saw she was poorly clad in shabby summer clothes, and with a little baby. She was standing with her back to the wind trying to keep the baby warm for she had nothing to wrap it up in. And through the window Martin heard the child crying. He immediately got up and went to the door, ascended the steps, and cried, "My good woman, come here. Why are you standing in the cold like that? Come into my room where it is warm. Right this way." The woman was astonished. She saw an old man in an apron and hands soiled black with wax, with crooked spectacles on his nose, calling her to him. But she followed him down to his apartment. "There, sit down my good woman near to the stove. You can get warm, and nurse the child." "I have no milk for him," she said. "I myself have not eaten." Martin shook his head and brought out the bread and a dish, opened the oven door, poured into the dish some cabbage soup and took out the pot with the porridge, and put it all on the table. "Eat my dear, and I will mind the little one. You see, I once had children of my own, I did!" And Martin took the baby while the woman sat down at the table and began to eat. "I'm a soldier's wife," she said. "It's now been seven months since they sent my husband away and I haven't received any of his pay yet. I lived as a cook, but the baby was born, and no one cares to keep me with a babe. We're going to my grandmother's, but she lives a long way off, and I just got tired out." Martin's sighed, "Haven't you any warm clothes?" The woman answered, "I have no money, and yesterday I pawned my last shawl for a 20 kopek coin." The

women came over and took her child. And Martin went to his closet and found a warm coat and gave it to her. "Perhaps you can use this?" And then he gave her a 20 kopek coin and told her to redeem her shawl. The woman looked at the old man and burst into tears. "May Christ bless you. May Christ bless you, Grandfather," she said. "He must have sent me to your window, otherwise my little child would have frozen to death." And giving more thanks and a kiss, she bid him goodbye.

Again Martin sat down at his bench under the window and went back to work. Still he was hoping for Christ to come. Soon Martin noticed that an old woman selling apples had stopped right in front of his window. Over her shoulder she had a bag full of kindling wood. She must have gathered up the wood as she walked the streets selling her apples. One could see that the bag was heavy on her back, and she wanted to shift the load to the other shoulder. So she put down her basket of apples on the sidewalk while she struggled to transfer her bag. Just then a small boy with a torn cap came along, reached down and stole an apple from the basket. He was about to make his escape, but the old woman caught the youngster by his sleeve. The little boy began to resist but the old woman's grasp held tight. She knocked off his cap and grabbed him by the hair. The little boy screamed and the old woman scolded him the more. Martin lost no time and sprang to the door and rushed out on the street. The old woman was pulling the youngster by his hair and scolding him and threatening to take him to the police. Martin took the boy by his arm and said to the woman, "Let him go, babushka, forgive him for Jesus' sake." "I'll forgive him with a broom, the little villain, I'll take him to the police." Martin again entreated the old woman, "Let him go babushka, he will never do it again. For Jesus' sake." The old woman finally let loose and the boy tried to run, but Martin kept him back. "Ask the babushka's forgiveness and don't you ever do it again. I saw you take the apple." With tears in his eyes the boy began to ask for forgiveness. "That's good," said Martin. "And now here's an apple for you." Martin took an apple from the basket and gave it to the boy. "I will pay you for it, babushka." "You ruin them that way," she said. "He ought to be whipped so that he will remember this for a week." "Ah, babushka, babushka," said Martin. "That is right according to our judgment. But not according to God's. If he is to be whipped for an apple, then what should be done to us? What?" The woman stood silent. Then Martin told the parable of the master who forgave his servant all that he owed him, yet that same servant then went and began to beat another servant who owed him a debt. The old woman listened and the boy listened. "God has commanded us to forgive," said Martin. "Else we may not be forgiven." The woman shook her head and sighed. "Of course, you're right, it was only a childish trick." And then she dropped the matter. As she was about to go, she began lifting the heavy bag of wood to her shoulder but the boy ran to her and said, "Let me carry that, babushka. It's on my way." The woman nodded her head and put the bag on the boy's back and side by side they both passed along down the street. And the old woman

was so pleased with the way things turned out, she forgot to ask Martin to pay for the apple. Martin stood motionless for a time and kept gazing after them. He heard them talking together all the time as they walked away.

Then Martin returned to his room and after working a little while longer, it grew darker and he saw it was the end of the day. He looked at his work, and despite all the interruptions he thought, "Well done." And then he picked up his Bible from the shelf. He intended to open the book at the very place where yesterday he had put a piece of leather as a mark. But as it happened, the Bible opened in another place, yet before he could read the passage, Martin remembered last night's dream. That Christ had said, "Look tomorrow on the street for I am coming to your house." He thought to himself, "I guess it was not to be." But as soon as he thought it, it seemed as though he heard someone stepping about behind him. Martin looked around, and there, in the dark corner, it seemed as though people were standing. He was confused as to know who they were, but he distinctly heard a voice whisper in his ear, "Martin, Martin, do you not recognize me?" "Who?" uttered Martin "It is I," said the voice. "It is I." And then the old street sweeper Stepanovitch stepped forth from the dark corner. He smiled, and then like a cloud faded away and vanished. "And it is I," said the voice. And again from the corner came the woman with her baby. The woman smiled at Martin and the baby giggled, and they too vanished. And for a third time again he heard, "It is I." And the babushka and the small boy with the apple stepped forward. Both of them smiled and vanished as well. Martin's soul rejoiced, and he bowed his head and made the sign of the cross. And just then his eyes fell on the words in the Bible where it had opened. And he read the words, "For I was hungry and you fed me, and I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in... In as much as you have done this for the least of these, my brethren, you have done it for me." And Martin Adievitch understood at that moment that his dream was real. That the Lord Jesus had indeed come to his house that day, and Martin had welcomed him.

Yes, the greatest commandment is, "To love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." We live in a world that at times seems so callous and self-centered. And if we ever hope for there to be change, it has to begin right here, with you and me. We, who are called to see other people in their pain, in their need. And then to respond with the love of Christ. And so, let us who know we are blessed, go and be a blessing to others. Amen.