

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, September 12, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"FIRST, A RELATIONSHIP"

Luke 10:38-42

What comes first in the Christian life? Is the Christian life primarily about keeping rules and observing the Ten Commandments? Well, that's part of it. But it's not first. So what about service - serving God, serving the church, serving others? Well service is a Christian ideal and something Christians strive to do. But neither does service come first in the Christian life. What comes first is a relationship with Jesus.

This is made clear in our Gospel reading today. Luke 10:38-42. "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he said. 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!'" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his teaching. Jesus told Martha that Mary had chosen what was better, and that it would not be taken away from her. What is best in the Christian life, what comes first is having a relationship with Jesus. What Jesus wants to give you and what he wants you to have above all is a relationship with himself. We shouldn't be surprised at that. If you ask people what is most important in life, most will speak of their relationships with family and friends and colleagues. Facebook is so popular because it enhances and enables what we value the most - relationships. Let me say it again - what comes first in the Christian life is a relationship with Jesus Christ. What comes first is being connected with God through Jesus

Now the idea that the Christian faith is first about keeping the Commandments and doing good may have been instilled in us when we were young. The relationship side of it was never stressed much, or if it was, we never really heard it or grasped it. Honestly, it took me a while to get it, too. And some who call themselves Christians, some active church-goers, maybe some of us here today, don't really know what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus or even how to get it started. Well, today's reading not only shows us that a relationship with Jesus comes first in the Christian life, it helps answer these other questions as well.

Verse 38 tells us how a relationship with Jesus gets started. "He entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha opened her house to him." A relationship to Jesus gets started when you open your life and receive his living presence. That's

what's really makes you a Christian, when you receive Jesus as your Saviour and Lord and come to God through him. A home becomes a Christian home when it's open to the presence and the influence of Jesus. And it's made possible because Jesus first draws near to us. You see, among all who have lived and died in the past, Jesus is the one who rose from the dead. He is the Son of God. He comes to us now by the power of the Holy Spirit. He really can enter our hearts and our lives.

Now Jesus is a gentleman. He says, "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door I will come in and eat with you and you with me." Jesus comes our way and knocks, but will not come in until we open the door for him. We can say "Yes" to him or we can say "No" and he will respect our choice.

What causes us to welcome him into our lives? Well, it generally happens when we hear that he is the one who loves us and cares for us and laid down his perfect life for us, that he is the friend of sinners, that He draws near to help us, that he is the way to God and the truth about God and the life of God, that he has won the victory over death and can bring us safely home. You hear this and you want him to be in your life. Paul prayed for the Ephesians that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." That's what it means to have a relationship with Jesus and it gets started when you say "Lord Jesus; I need you; I trust you, come in and dwell in my heart." And he does.

Now you can welcome Jesus many times and any time you feel you need for him. I've done that. But there has to be a first time. Some years ago I found a little Gideon's Bible in a drawer which I had been given in Grade Five. On the back inside cover God's plan of salvation was explained. There was an invitation to accept Jesus as your Saviour and a place to sign that you had done so. And there in a boy's hand writing was my signature and the date, around Christmas 1965. That was the first time that I consciously welcomed Jesus into my life. Of course, he knew me before that. He had been near me from the day of my baptism and even before. But on that day I began a relationship with Jesus from my side. Now I had actually forgotten about that day, and over the years there have been many times when I have forgotten him. But he has never forgotten me or forsaken me. "Great is his faithfulness". My relationship with Jesus has been sustained far more by him than by me. So it is for anyone who has a relationship with Jesus Christ.

"He entered a village, where a woman named Martha opened her house to him." That's how your relationship with Jesus starts, when you open your life to him, when you hear him knocking and say, "Come in Lord."

The next thing I want us to see is that in this relationship Jesus wants to serve us. He wants to serve us before we serve Him.

I have noticed from pastoral visiting that there are two kinds of homes - the "shoes-on" homes and the "shoes-off" homes. Whenever I enter a home I always offer to take my shoes off. Some folk are obviously glad when I remove my shoes. Others say don't

bother with that - we leave shoes on in here. Now either way is fine with me. My mother's house is definitely a shoes-off type of house. When we visit she greets us at the door with a "good to see you," then adds "and take off your shoes before you go a step further."

Now Martha's house was a shoes-off house. That had nothing to do with Martha. All homes were that way. Visitors' feet would be caked with dirt from walking on dusty roads. So a bowl of water was set near the door for a visitor to wash his or her feet. Jesus would have done that as he came into the house. Then Mary sat down at Jesus' feet listening to his teaching. And when Martha got in a snit because Mary was not helping with meal preparations, Jesus gently rebuked her. "Martha, Martha, you are distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." Jesus was serving Mary in those moments, and Jesus would not let that be interrupted.

Now Martha's service was certainly needed. Indeed, she was a conscientious and devoted servant. But her timing was wrong. She was serving before she had allowed Jesus to serve her. And so rather than being focused in her service, she became worried and distracted and resentful. It was no joy for her.

It is the same for us, too. Of course, serving Jesus, serving the church, serving others is so very important. Our Sunday School coordinators have worked hard this summer to prepare for the children coming back this fall. We are very grateful for their service. Service is very important, but it is so very necessary to be strengthened and served by Jesus as we serve and even before we serve. Otherwise our service becomes distracted, anxious and joyless. We become weary in well-doing. Our service is so much more effective when we let Jesus serve us first. And in our relationship with him that's exactly what he wants to do.

Some very active Christians miss this. They perform good and necessary service, but rarely take time to soak up Jesus' teaching, to be fed at his table, to be in his presence. Some people come to church only when they have a task to perform that day. But please come on those Sundays when nothing is required of you. Just come into Jesus' presence and let yourself be washed by his grace and filled with his strength and touched by his peace. Take ten minutes every day to be in God's presence, to pray, to read Scripture, to lift your plans up to God and ask for his guidance. Let Jesus' risen life take hold of you more fully. Let Jesus serve you.

I read of a Mennonite church in Winnipeg which decided this year to suspend all its committee work for six months and to use that time to get more in touch with God, to sit at Jesus' feet, to be intentional about Bible study and prayer and seeking God's direction. Now I'm not recommending that we suspend all service and work for six months, but it is good to be reminded of this - that in our relationship with Jesus, he wants to serve us even before we serve him.

Finally this. Once Jesus has served us, he will send us to serve.

If we extend the story a bit in our imagination, we may well hear Jesus say to Mary after supper. "Mary, now you go and help your sister." Or even more likely, "Mary you go and do the dishes while Martha spends some time with me."

Actually the Bible shows us that there was also great faith in Martha and great service in Mary. Later, when Jesus came to the home after their brother Lazarus died, Jesus told Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live... Do you believe this?" And Martha showed that she too had been spending time with Jesus for she knew exactly who he was. She answered with this great statement of faith, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." Then just before his death, Jesus came for one more supper at the sisters' house. And this time Mary performed one of the greatest services ever given to Jesus - anointing Jesus' feet with her expensive perfume preparing him for his burial. In both sisters we see faith and service. Both of them had opened the door of their hearts to Jesus. Both of them had a close relationship with the Lord. Jesus seeks to make us like both of them, those who are served by him and those who serve him.

This Sunday in September is often a time when we list services which need to be done in the church. And over the next few weeks you will be asked to commit your gifts to various tasks in obedience to the Lord's call. But today I just want to make sure we get the order right. What comes first in the Christian life is a relationship with Jesus, opening the door and allowing Jesus into our lives by faith. In that relationship we let Jesus serve us first so that we can go forth and serve faithfully in his name. And believe me, there will be plenty for us to do. As Paul says, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."