

Sermon- 10/6/2019

“Take your place at the table”

Veda Lewis

Luke 17:5-10

So, here is a package of mustard seeds to accompany this familiar passage from Luke. But I have to tell you, I read right past the mustard seed and the mulberry tree, straight to the second part of the scripture.

It begins, “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table.’?”

The Brits have a phrase, “if I’m honest”. Well, if I’m honest, I stumbled across the first line. “Who among would you say to your *slave*”?

Whoa! I couldn’t read any further. As an African American, or more accurately, perhaps, an American descended from enslaved Africans, the idea of Jesus talking about slavery, without taking the opportunity to preach about how it should be abolished? It didn’t sit well with me.

Slavery is such a hot button topic. The likely truth is that all of us Americans of varied descent have some form of enslavement, indentured servitude, or caste system in our ancestry.

As little as a few years ago, I heard a news story about a peach farm in Georgia where the workers were duped into indentured servitude. The woman who owned the place required the workers to live in her flimsy housing and shop at her store with overpriced goods. It was so bad that the workers wound up indebted to her and could not leave, no matter how many hours they worked.

When reading in our neatly printed Bibles, it can be easy to forget just how long ago these words were written and the harsh realities of the lives of the people in these stories.

If I’m honest though, maybe those realities are not hard to imagine. We need only look at the sad state of affairs in Israel/Palestine today, the same lands Jesus walked, so long ago.

After this hiccup, I knew I would need help wrapping my mind around this scripture, so I went to [lectionary.org](http://lectionary.org), now renamed [sermonwriter.org](http://sermonwriter.org). There, lay sermon writers like me can find the insights of clergy like retired Disciples of Christ pastor Rev. Richard Niell Donovan, who provide biblical commentary. He writes, “This parable is difficult for several reasons. First, it seems as if Jesus is approving slavery.

Second, it seems uncaring and unfair. Third, it is not our experience. We are accustomed to rewarding faithful employees (or to being rewarded), lest they find a more generous employer (or lest we find another job).”

In addition, he states, that Jesus “uses a situation common in Jesus’ day to illustrate a spiritual truth.”

Rev. Donovan proposes that this passage is really “the parable of the under-appreciated servant”. “The Greek translation of the word “doulon or doulos” can be translated servant or slave.” He continues, “Given our sensibilities regarding slavery, it would seem better to translate it ‘servant’ here.”

The idea of the parable could be that the disciples, as servants of God, should not expect special treatment for simply doing what God commands. This is likened to doing your duty.

To understand the story better, consider that the servant is one who works both in the field and in the master’s house. To make dinner for your servant after they have spent the day ploughing your field would be beyond the call of duty, but don’t expect any bonus points from God. The reason being that God is always viewing us by grace, not merit. It doesn’t mean that you won’t necessarily get bonus points, just remember that life is not all about quid pro quo.

The point of the scripture, to me, with the help of Rev. Donovan’s commentary, is that we should treat each other with the same grace that God gives us. As my stepmom frequently reminds me, we get by through grace and mercy, mercy and grace.

Who are the servants in our lives?

At first thought, we might feel that we don’t have servants, in the form described in the scripture. We pay for services, or barter, we don’t force anyone to serve us.

However, think a bit wider. Think about when you go out to eat. You engage in an economic relationship with the wait staff who literally serve you. Unless they own the place, they are beholden to you in a way. If you don’t like the service, you can leave a poor tip or complain to management, jeopardizing their very economic security.

If you are a microbusiness, selling your extra possessions on eBay, or old books on Amazon.com, you are beholden to the customers you serve for their good reviews of your service. One bad review could cripple your small business.

Recently, I ordered a used book on Amazon. The seller had excellent ratings, a requirement for me. Time went by and the book had not shipped when it should. I

checked the seller's digital storefront and poor ratings had begun to stream in. "My book hasn't shipped. This seller is a scam. Don't buy from this seller. No response from seller." It was a torrent of bad reviews and the seller's rating plummeted. Your account is never charged until your item ships, so these folks were not out any cash, just annoyed and inconvenienced until their order could be canceled by Amazon.

As a person who has sold a book or two online, I sat back in awe at how mean and thoughtless people were being. My God, this person could be in a hospital bed, unable to manage their account and no friend or relative who could step in and temporarily close up their digital store. My book never shipped and after a couple of weeks Amazon cancelled the order. After a couple more weeks the seller had returned and was complying with orders. Anyone here with experience in retail knows that the seller is the servant to the customers.

I looked up the definition of the word "serf" (s-e-r-f) at dictionary.com. A serf is described as an agricultural laborer bound under the feudal system to work on his lord's estate. As a retired civil servant, I can relate to this. I've seen more than one boss who acted like a feudal lord.

Who, in our personal world, is bound with us under an economic relationship, or a loving relationship, or family relationship (which hopefully has some love), to work on our estate?

You might recall, especially if you were an early devotee of Apple Computer products, that Microsoft employees were once called Microserfs. The notion of "serfdom" was iconically represented in the Apple Macintosh commercial that aired only once, during the Super Bowl in 1980. In that piece, unquestioning followers (aka Microsoft product users) were being fed mind control and kept in operating system slavery. A female athlete comes and destroys the screen to save them from their world of torture. A world where a few years ago at work, where I was forced to use a pc, I had to press the button that said "Start", in order to stop the computer.

The "me too" movement has opened our eyes to the role that power plays in influencing human behavior, even in the face of sexual harm. Employees who feel crippled from responding in a hostile environment are more than servants, they are enslaved.

How are we treating those who serve us in our lives? Do we invite them to take their place at the table? Inviting them to the table could mean treating them with respect.

Do we acknowledge to our spouses the importance of the role they play in building our life together?

Do we thank the server when she brings that glass of water we asked for? Do we call her by name? It's right there on her badge.

Or do we continue chatting with our friend as though nothing just occurred?

Do we respect the time our friends give in our relationships? Do we say thank you and mean it?

Do we treat other members of our church community with the grace that we would expect as God views our own lives?

It is such a simple concept, yet it requires constant diligence.

Some believe that we are our best selves as humans when we are in the midst of catastrophe; when the bounds of some societal relationships are broken and replaced by human kindness.

To the contrary, perhaps we are indeed our best when we can muster the diligence to live beyond the “call of duty”, under the flag of grace, in our everyday lives.

Perhaps it takes just a little faith. (Mustard seed package).

Amen