

C Lectionary 27 10.2.22

Luke 17:5-10

Focus Statement: God sets the feast and invites us to the table.

“We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” [pause]. Well friends, fellow worthless slaves, it appears there are no participation trophies in heaven. God’s not going to give us a ribbon for doing what we were told. We’re going to unpack that whole “worthless slaves” thing in a minute here, I promise. But before we do, let’s look at how we got here.

The last couple of weeks have been this series of parables where Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, who were, if you remember “lovers of money” on the dangers of wealth. That series reached its peak last week with the rich man stuck in internal torment on the far side of an uncrossable chasm, while Lazarus reclined on the bosom of Abraham. It was from that rather heavy conclusion that Jesus turned his attention to the disciples in the start of chapter seventeen. This is a different series than that, but the whole “uncrossable chasm” mood is in the air.

Chapter seventeen starts out with Jesus telling the disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come.” Which, that sounds ok, right. Just Jesus affirming the disciples that, yeah, they’re going to slip up sometimes, like the Pharisees and the money. But Jesus, O Jesus, he never stops when he’s ahead. He goes on, “but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown in the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.” And as if the threat of being thrown into the sea with the first century equivalent of cement shoes wasn’t enough,

Jesus then went on to demand that his disciples forgive those who sin, no matter what. Even if they sin seven times *in the same day*, you still must forgive them seven times. Seven, remember, is the number that represents completeness, so the point here is, even if this person is just continually sinning against you, still you have to forgive them.

It is to this series of impossible demands that the disciples beg Jesus, "Increase our faith!" The point here is clear. The disciples just sat through the whole rich man and the uncrossable chasm story, they knew the stakes are high. Now Jesus seems to have just made the bar even higher, and these poor guys are like, there's no way. There's no way we can meet this goal with the faith we have and the people we are. You've got to make us better Jesus, you've got to give us more, because we are going to miserably fail at this with who we are right now.

And you'd think Jesus would be on board with that, right? Seems like an earnest demand for increased faith is, like, the thing Jesus was leaning to here. But no. Because what did Jesus say to them in response, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." And—mixed metaphor of planting trees in the sea notwithstanding—what the syntax of this sentence implies is clear. If you had faith the size of a mustard seed... but you do not, so this mulberry tree is staying right here.

What Jesus is getting at here is the very nature of faith itself. The disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, as if faith was something they had control over. What Jesus implies

with this whole mustard seed / mulberry tree / sea thing is that it is not our faith that does great things, it is God's faith working through us. Any amount of our own faith could move mountains. But the thing is we don't have our own faith. What we have is God's faith in us, with us, through us. And if our own faith could plant trees in the sea, just imagine what God's faith in us can do. We don't need to increase our faith; the faith of God in us is more than enough for all our needs.

Which gets us back to being worthless slaves, doing only what we ought to have done. There are lots of ways to try and soften the blow of this sentence, recognizing that as much as we would like to hear Jesus take an abolitionist stance here, in the first century thirty to fifty percent of all people were slaves, and first century slavery was not the same as chattel slavery in the American south, and the word translated here as worthless, really has more of a sense of someone to whom nothing is owed, so unmeritorious or undeserving is really a better translation, the fact remains, "we are worthless slaves, we have only done what we ought to have done," is a hard sentence to end a reading on.

But that, dear people of God, is the good news of this reading. Because what this parable is reminding us is that our place at the table, our location in the kingdom of God, is not based on our merit, it is based on God's goodness. While the use of slave in this parable hits us as being particularly harsh in our modern context, and should, let's not get this wrong, in the ears of Jesus' audience, having a slave work in the field and then serve dinner wasn't an extraordinary expectation, it was the job description. I don't get a bonus every time I preach a sermon. You all are nice, and you always thank me and tell me what you

appreciated about the sermon, but there isn't like a trophy given. And nor should there be, that would be weird, preaching a sermon on Sunday morning is part of my job, it is the thing you pay me to do. Just so with the slave. Their job was to serve the meal, so they serve the meal. One would hope, and expect, that the master wouldn't be a jerk about it and would thank the slave for doing it, but a bonus wouldn't be expected. So too with the disciples. Forgiving others and not causing others to stumble is the bare minimum job description of discipleship. They don't need or deserve some sort of special recognition, some sort of place of honor at the table for doing what is expected of a disciple. That's just what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

We don't deserve a place of honor at the table, we have not earned our space in the kingdom, but, and here is the good news, dear people of God, God has set the table for us anyway. Not because we have earned it, not because we deserve it, but because setting a place at the table of the Lord is how God shows God's great love for us. Every Sunday we gather around this table for a foretaste of the promised feast. This table is set with fine linens, we are served bread for the journey and wine to warm our hearts, and all, everyone, whoever you are, however you come, whatever you bring, are welcome. This table is God's table. This feast is God's feast. You don't have to earn your place; you don't have to deserve this meal. This is a table set for you by God because preparing a feast for God's people is just one of God's many and varied love languages. So come to the table, dear people of God. Bring your longing for increased faith, bring your questions of worthiness, bring your open hands ready to receive. God has set this table for you, who you are, as you are. Come. Thanks be to God. Amen.