

Invited To The Table

Luke 17:5-10

I doubt that very many sermons have ever been preached on Luke 17:7-10. All of us know Luke 17:6. Jesus said, "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." Perhaps millions of sermons have been preached on this text.

But how many of you have ever heard a sermon on Jesus' words beginning with verse 7? Listen closely while I read: "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, '~Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, '~Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So, you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, '~We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Some of you may ask, "That's in the teachings of Jesus? That doesn't sound like Jesus at all." Well, it's there. And because it's there, I believe that somehow it can be a vehicle of grace--regardless of how offensive it may sound to our modern ears.

We are offended by the word, "slave." "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, '~Come here at once and take your place at the table'?" That sounds awful. And yet Jesus was speaking at a particular time in history, within a particular cultural context--2,000 years ago. Our ancestors owned slaves or were slaves a 157 years ago. Progress is slow. Jesus wants us to be offended by such language today. You and I would echo the words of Abraham Lincoln who said, "Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally." We are offended by the idea of slavery, as well we should be.

Second, we are offended by how elitist the story sounds. "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, '~Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, '~Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'?"

Maybe if you and I had grown up with servants in the house we could stomach this passage a little easier. "Here, servant, you feed me, and you can have some later." Let's face it, there are some people who would have no problem with this approach at all. Even without slavery, it's always been necessary for people in the leisure class to regard those who worked in their household as slightly less worthy than themselves. How else could you expect your household staff to eat in the kitchen while serving you in the fine dining room?

But this doesn't sound like Jesus, does it? And of course, that is the point. Jesus has so affected our lives that we can never look at another human being as being less worthy than we are. So, we must look for a deeper lesson in this passage--even though we are offended by the reference to slaves and by how elitist it sounds.

We are offended because we see the story as an attack on our own self-esteem. "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, '~Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, '~Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'?" Then Jesus adds, "Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So, you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, '~We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Jesus isn't talking about people at the bottom of society at all. He's talking about us. "So, you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, '~We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

That's hard. Jesus is not only calling us worthless slaves, but also telling us not to expect thanks for our good works. After all, those good works are no more than we should have done in the first place. We're used to being patted on the back when we've done what we ought to do. We're used to being held up as paragons of virtue when we've fulfilled our responsibilities.

In fact, we think God owes us some favors because we've done what God called us to do. That's how some of us feel. We've been members of the church for twenty years. We have almost perfect attendance in Sunday School. We tithe--or close to it at least. And then a dark cloud comes into our life--our business fails, a loved one is sick, we discover a lump--and immediately we think, "Doesn't God know who I am? Doesn't God know how much good I've done?"

Be honest now. In your heart of hearts, don't you really believe that, because you are one of God's people, God ought to work a little harder to take care of you? God ought to tilt the table in your direction, just a little. That's no more than you deserve.

Then we come to the Lord's table. We hear these words, "This is my body that was broken for you . . . This is my blood which was shed for you." And they remind us that we don't deserve anything at all. All our righteousness is as filthy rags, as Paul reminds us. But that's all right. Christ came for the undeserving. Christ came for us.

There was an article in National Geographic sometime back about the caste system in India. For over 1,500 years, Indian society has been dominated by this ruthless system in which some people are born to power and privilege, while others are born into poverty and virtual slavery. The lowest caste in Hindu society is the Untouchables. Untouchables are the victims of violence and discrimination. In many villages, they are forced to live in their own ghettos. If an Untouchable tries to buy land, or drink from a public well, or apply for a job that is outside their caste, they are often harassed, beaten, or killed.

Mahatma Gandhi, who led the Indian nation in their struggle for independence from British rule, opposed the caste system. In 1933, he traveled across India, advocating for the right of Untouchables to enter Hindu temples. Gandhi also created a new name for the Untouchable class. He called them Harijan, which means "people of God." Once you were untouchable, but now you are people of God. He was acknowledging that these people who were treated like dirt by social decree are people of great worth in God's eyes.

That is what the Lord's Supper says to us. We are of unimaginable worth to God. Not because we've been in church all our lives, not because we put a twenty in the offering plate, not because we are virtuous people--but because Christ died in our behalf. This is not to minimize the importance of good works. It is to say that when it comes to salvation, our good works are irrelevant.

In human society some people may eat in the fine dining room while others eat back in the kitchen, but not in God's society. In God's society, everyone is invited to dine at the Master's table. Here all are equal. Won't you come and enjoy God's fellowship? Don't worry about being worthy to receive this sacrament. None of us is. God says, "That's all right. Christ has made you worthy. Christ died for you."