

October 7, 2007

Scripture readings: Lamentations 1:1-6, and Luke 17:5-10

Sermon title: "Who's the Boss?"

"I work my fingers to the bone, I cook, I clean, I bring home a paycheck, I mow the lawn, I get the kids on the school bus, I volunteer endless hours, I'm there when others aren't, and no one ever even says 'thank you'! All I want is some gratitude!"

Well now, I think at one time or another we all fall into sort of a "thankless martyr" complex. We've all had days when we feel taken for granted and unrecognized. But is it wrong to want acknowledgement for what we accomplish?

There are all sorts of crassly commercial books in the stores on self-affirmation, with their themes of "You are Number One! You are Wonderful!" As Christians, we are given a broader mindset, we are called to see the whole picture of humanity and creation, and look beyond our own private realm.

Though we may tire of the way the self-affirmation books feed a short-sighted and self-absorbed mindset, we can also sense their appeal. We are not doormats, after all. We do have the image of God within us. We are created to be a good and lovely creation, whether or not we live up to that intention. God wills wholeness and restoration for us when we do veer off the track. We have a loving and merciful God who pursues us relentlessly when we are lost.

But with such a giving, loving, even sacrificing God, it is easy to lose sight of the place of humanity before our Creator God. So when Jesus tells a small parable about a slave and a boss, it is very easy for us to first put ourselves in the place of "boss." Jesus even begins the parable, "Who among you would say to your slave...." Ah, the hearer thinks. "I am put into the place of the slave owner, and certainly not the slave."

And why not? Way back in Genesis, as God creates human beings, God announces that we are made in the very image and likeness of God. Then God puts us in a very high place: "...let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." Goodness me, it sounds like we all get to be little emperors!

Then God gives us abilities and freedoms that we don't always handle well, but nevertheless, they are given in trust and graciousness. Should we make such a mess of things that we can't find our way out of our self-created problems, God is good to intervene and correct things. God even sends an only child, Jesus, sacrificially loving us back to wholeness.

We are loved, forgiven, and nurtured beyond human understanding by this amazing God. So when Jesus starts out with this parable, of course we assume we are to hear

something about how we should be good to all those slaves or other unblessed elements of Creation that are placed under our dominion.

So it comes as quite a shock when Jesus wraps up the parable this way: “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!’”

What?! Isn't there something about the slave owner turning around and serving the slave? Jesus does things like that at other times in his ministry. Remember the footwashing that Jesus gives to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion? He even says, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.” Jesus had very unexpectedly turned the tables on his followers, and he had taken the place of a lowly slave to wash everybody's feet. He is also known to say things such as “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” He speaks of people in leadership becoming “the slave of all,” and so forth. So why doesn't this parable show us a slave owner taking pity upon a slave that has toiled under the heat of day in the field for long hours? Why doesn't the slave owner give the slave a break and say, “Here, I'll fix supper for you tonight.” It would fit so well with everything else Jesus teaches.

And for many persons in the human family that have been forced into subservient roles, such as people in developing nations, persons caught in the cycle of poverty, women, abused members of a household, or persons in a minority population, this language of servanthood doesn't do a lot. “Remember you are slaves and not the slave owner!” is very likely to get a reaction like, “Never again!” “I don't think so!” “I'm outta here!”

Well, here's an example of when we think we have God's Word to us all neatly explained and pigeonholed, and just when it seems to fit nicely into our human understanding and categories, it veers off into something deeper and different. The point that Jesus makes with this parable with a twist is this: the issue is NOT how the boss treats the servant. Such behavior is a deep issue for Jesus, and it is addressed many times throughout the Scriptures, so this Scripture is NOT to be misused as a loophole for persons in power to abuse other persons within their oversight. Rather, the issue in this parable is: how does the servant understand the role of servant?

How do you understand your place before God? God is so loving and giving, it is easy to slip into a mindset of God existing only for human benefit. And you know, life is really impoverished when we think that God owes us a good living, when we think that somehow God is indebted to us. And somehow we end up swimming backwards when we get the thought that we've done so very much in the service of God, now we can retire into all the benefits of God's blessings. That's the fallacy of the whole “Gospel of Success” mindset: you do certain things for God, and then God will have to give you all kinds of successes. That is not the way it works, and when we get too far down that road of thinking God works for us, then we need to bring out this particular parable. The life of faith can never say, “Now that I have been faithful, or now that I have completed all the duties of love, it is my turn to be served by God.” That is not the way it works.

Today we gather around the table of Jesus Christ, and on this particular Sunday, we gather also with our brothers and sisters around the world. There are many people that are called “brother” and “sister” that do not look like us, that cannot afford to dress like us or eat like us. There are many, many others in this world, and when we forget them, we forget a part of ourselves, a part of the body of Christ. God never stops calling on us to remember them and to walk alongside of them. We cannot stop and say, “Well, I gave to UNICEF once on Halloween,’ or some such thing. You are still God’s servant. I am still God’s servant. We must continue to remember all of God’s beloved children.

And we dedicate our Peacemaking Offering today. It funds programs throughout our local church and our denomination that can become “A Light for the Nations,” like the bulletin insert outlines. Peacemaking is an endless task, and we cannot put our feet up on the ottoman or the recliner chair, and say, “Okay, I did some peacemaking stuff once. I’m done.” Do you know how many people blame God for wars and violence and suffering in the world? Nice try! “We pray for peace, and God hasn’t done anything about it yet!” Well guess what? God is not your errand boy, and this parable reminds us of that. God hears your prayers, and God chooses to respond through your voices, through your efforts, through your work and witness. We expect God to do all of OUR peacemaking! But what are we doing for peace in our world?

I really don’t like being called a “worthless slave,” but I am thankful that the greater witness of Scripture testifies that I am anything but “worthless” to God. However, the greater witness of Scripture, and especially this parable, reminds me that God is not my “Mr. step and fetch it.” God is God, and I am God’s servant. And there is still a lot of work to be done in the name of God. And you know, once you immerse yourself in God’s work and business, you find that there is really no greater joy, no greater calling, no greater meaning, than to be the servant of God. Amen.