

October 3, 2010

Scripture: Luke 17:5-10

Sermon: "Your Place at the Table"

For the third week in a row, we get a text that only Luke shares in his gospel. This text is confusing and strange. And as I was preparing for this sermon, most commentators gave the advice to only focus on the positive statements of verses 5 and 6 and ignore the rest because there was just too much baggage with the terms "slave and master." Maybe against my better judgment, I ignored most of the commentators' advice to only focus on verse 5 and 6 and tried to take a look at the whole text, to see what's going on around this text because I came to the realization that if Luke had wanted us to ignore this text, he wouldn't have included it just like the other Gospels.

Luke had a point and a purpose to adding this text to his Gospel and we owe him the common courtesy of listening to him. And for us to do that, we must look at what has happened before this text in the Gospel of Luke. As we know, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he is focusing all his attention on giving last minute instructions to just his disciples. And in a few verses before this text, he tells them what they have to do as his followers. He talks about forgiveness of sins. He warns them about being stumbling blocks for others. These instructions that Jesus is giving to his disciples are pretty major stuff that deal with our relationship with each other as people of faith and how we live out our faith as his disciples. He is giving them the Keys to the Kingdom, one could say.

And the strange fact is that the disciples know that this is some pretty big stuff. They begin to understand that these things that Jesus is talking about are the keys to the Kingdom. And they begin to worry. They remember how they have disappointed Jesus before. They remember their track record. In all honesty, they can't figure out why Jesus chose them and not some other people, others who were more intelligent, others who were more popular, others who had more money, others who had more influence, others who probably could do a better job at being Jesus' disciples than this ragged band of 12. These thoughts of doubt about whether they had the right stuff for the job began to cloud their minds and shake their confidence so they began to plead with Jesus to increase their faith because of course that would solve all their problems, if they just had a little bit more...They would be able to do so much more if they only had more faith...They would become just like those others who would have been perfect for the job as Jesus' disciples in they only had a little more faith...They would be better prepared to be Jesus' disciples if they only had a little more faith...

And Jesus responds...Increase your faith! Did you hear what I just said? Forgiveness and living in community are what you should be trying to do anyway as my disciples, as children of God because these things are the way of God's Kingdom, because these are the gifts that God first showed you, because these are the things that unite God's people, because these are things that God has always asked God's people to do here on earth. Forgiveness, community, caring, compassion, looking out for each other, these are not new things.

I don't need to increase your faith. as my disciples, you have everything you need to be people of faith because you have well...faith, even though you say it is too small. That small faith that you claim to have will allow you to do amazing things, not because you are you, but because God is God. Not because you have special powers or a special connection with God that no one else can obtain or that you have more faith than someone else. No, the faith you have, small though you say it is, can move this mulberry tree into the sea because nothing is impossible for God.

Faith doesn't come in levels. It is either there or it isn't. I can't increase your faith as a reward for you being people of faith because faith doesn't work that way. It is either there or it isn't. Faith isn't a reward for good behavior. Faith isn't a reward for being perfect. Faith isn't a reward for simply being a person of God. You are a person of God because you have faith. Faith: it is either there or it isn't. I can't make you have faith and I can't increase your faith.

all you have to do is trust in God and be the people that God created you to be. All you have to do is do the things that God calls you to do like, love justice, act in kindness and to love God with all your heart, mind and soul. All you have to do as people of faith is well...have faith and live out your calling by making the love of God more real in this day or time. All you have to do is your job, your duty, your calling as people of faith and that job, that duty, that calling is to trust that God is still working in this world, to have faith that all things are possible through God, to know that you don't have to worry about failure because God will supply the opportunities and the possibilities that will allow God's love to be shown here on earth, to know that it is not up to you and me. It is up to God because you are you and God is God. All you have to do as my disciples is to follow your calling which is to share the gift of God's love and God's grace with all of God's children.

Because when you do these simple things, your eyes will be open to the amazing things that God is already doing around you, not because you are better than anyone else, but because God is God and God is doing some amazing things here on earth, not because your faith has been increased or that you have been rewarded for good behavior, but because we become aware that God uses the most ordinary things to do some extraordinary acts of love, grace, and hope. All we have to do is realize that there are no others better for the job. All we have to do is live out our calling as servants of God.

After Jesus finishes speaking with his disciples, he turns and looks at them and all he sees is blank stares. So he tries again, this time, using a familiar analogy that would hopefully strike some understanding with his disciples, this time using the imagery of a servant coming in from the fields. "Okay, let's try it this way...Which one of you would invite your servant who has been working in the fields all day long to come and eat at the table as soon as he walks in the door? Well, no one. That's not how the servant/masters roles work. In all honesty, most people would tell this servant to serve them first before serving themselves.

The servant would do his or her duty first because he or she never stops being a servant. It's not a hat that he or she puts on and then can take off at some other point. There is no time when he or she stops being a servant. Just like there is no time when we stop being servants of God. We just are! It is our job, our calling, our duty. It is a part of who we are. And just like the servant in the story, we understand that there are no rewards for do what is already asked of us as God's servants.

The servant in the story doesn't say increase my pay before I serve you this meal. No, the servant does his or her duty first. The servant doesn't expect to be rewarded for his or her good behavior because that is not the role of the servant. We are who we are and God is God. We serve God. We serve God who has already rewarded us with love, with grace, with hope. We don't need to be rewarded for having faith. We don't need to be rewarded for being the people that God created us to be. We don't need to be rewarded as servants of God. Because we realize that we are already so blessed. What more could we ask for!?

We are not God and we are not in the position of telling God how things should be done here on earth. We are not master and God the servant. It is the other way around. We are who we are and God is God.

What Jesus is trying to get his disciples and us to understand today is that faith and service to God are not measured in quantity. What Jesus is trying to get these disciples and us to do today is throw out the notion or the excuse "If we only had enough faith, we would or we could..." What Jesus is trying to get the disciples and us to understand is that there is no other person better for the job of servant of God because God has called us to that position, no ifs, ands, or buts. We are servants of God and we have everything we need to do our job. We have faith. And as we do our job, our duty, our calling, we realize that we don't need to ask for reward because the job, the duty, the calling is reward enough.

It comes down to one simple question: We either do our job as servants of God or we don't. There is no in between. Either we trust God to do amazing things in our lives or we don't. Either we live out the principles of the Kingdom of God in our lives or we don't. Either we understand that we are not God and God doesn't exist to serve us or we don't which can lead to a very frustrating existence, especially when we think we are in control.

In this particular text, Luke is inviting us to see this world, not through the lens of quantity, but through the lens of quality, through the lens of the Kingdom of God where we as people of faith will not get rewarded or thanked for doing our calling as people of faith because the simple fact is that what we do as people of faith is in response to the gifts that we have been given by our God, the gifts of love, the gifts of grace, the gifts of hope, the gifts of compassion. In fact, the calling and claiming to be one of God's own beloved is in itself reward enough because we know that we are forgiven, loved and freed. We know that we have been claimed and named and no one, and nothing can take that away.

All we have to do is "think big, and not small, to make mistakes and not worry about failure; [all we have to do is trust that] God will supply us with possibilities and insights to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. All we have to do is ...well, have faith [and to do what God called us to do] which is open our eyes to a deeper, more energetic reality than we could ever imagine", which is live out our lives as people of faith, not expecting rewards for good behavior, but as a response to the many blessings that God has given to us.

Faith is not about the rewards or the praise or the acclamations we may receive. Faith is about trusting that God is in control, that God is working in this world. Faith is about being God's servant and doing what is required of us, no excuses, no gold stars, no extra points. The simple fact is that faith is about the fact that God is God and we are not. The simple fact is that faith opens our eyes to the many blessings that fill our lives and we respond in kind to all of God's children.

And there is no better message for us as we gather around the table with our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world to celebrate the tokens of God's love for all of God's children. Because we realize that faith is not about what we get in the deal. Faith is about what we can offer to all of God's children and what a better place to see faith in action, to see how faith really works, to see how faith exists than at God's table.

Because when we extend the invitation to the table to all of God's children, we offer "friendship, fellowship, good conversation, intimacy, and closeness". When we extend the invitation to the table, we invite all to be our guests and we offer them food and we offer them drink and most importantly we offer ourselves, just like Jesus did that night so long ago. When we extend the invitation to the table, we offer the opportunity for everyone to experience the Kingdom of God, here on earth, which is in itself the best reward. Who could ask for anything more?!

May we always live out our faith in response to the many blessings that already fill our lives as servants of God. Amen.