

“When Do We Eat?”
Luke 17:5-10
Sunday, October 3, 2010
United Methodist Church of Yucaipa
Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Do you remember that hilarious Bill Cosby routine about "Noah's Ark?" I love that routine! In it, two hippos are being herded through the doors of the Ark and God says, "Noah!" Noah replies, as usual, "Yes, Lord!" "Both of those are male. We need a female."

Noah is furious. He complains that it is difficult to turn a hippo around on a boat, much less take him out, and then go round up another one. God says, "I don't care. Get another hippo." Finally, in desperation, Noah shouts, "Why don't you just change one of them?"

And God replies, "Noah? How long can you tread water?"

God has given Noah a duty to perform. God is not interested in excuses.

Today's scripture reading illustrates the relationship between faith and duty. Jesus uses the example of a master and his servants and asks three questions of the disciples: Who among you would invite a servant to eat at table with you? Would you not rather tell him to serve you first and eat his own meal later? After you finish your meal, do you thank the servant for performing his duties?

I. Master and Servants

Jesus puts his listeners in the role of the master and asks them how they normally treat their servants. Now for you and me, this is a bit difficult to relate to. We don't have any servants. We do, in fact, thank servers for waiting on us at restaurants. We may even feel a bit uncomfortable being served by others.

In Jesus' day there were rich people and poor people, masters and slaves. Masters did not thank slaves for doing work. Remembering our own slave history in this country, we may feel a bit uncomfortable with the whole master-slave scenario in Jesus' story.

And Jesus wants us to get into the role of being a master. The master is the one with the power. The master is the boss. The master is the one who calls the shots.

King Duncan tells a story about John D. Rockefeller, one of the richest people who has ever lived. "There is probably nothing of material value in this world," writes Duncan, "that John D. Rockefeller could not provide for his children. Did you know, however, that he had a daughter who became obsessed with the fear that she would die penniless? Her years were haunted with the fear that she would die destitute. Can you imagine such a thing as a Rockefeller worried sick about money?"

The servant is the one in Jesus' teaching who has a reason to be worried about money. Much more so than John D. Rockefeller's daughter. The servant is the one who is powerless.

Jesus asks his listeners to identify with the master. His three questions are rhetorical. After all, to a master, the answers are obvious.

Who among you would invite a servant to eat at table with you? "No one!"

Would you not rather tell him to serve you first and eat his own meal later? "Yes!"

After you finish your meal, do you thank the servant for performing his duties? "No!"

The disciples are right with Jesus so far. They are in Jesus' inner circle. So when Jesus asks his questions, they think he is teaching them how to be good masters. The teaching makes sense to the disciples because it makes them feel special, better than the others.

But then Jesus flips them out of their power position. He says, “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

Surprise! The disciples are not to be counted as masters. They are to be counted as servants.

II. When Do We Eat?

When do the servants eat? After the master has eaten. When are the disciples rewarded for their work? Never. It is expected of them. It is their duty as servants of the kingdom.

The servants always receive enough food so they are strong enough to work the next day. They never store up enough extra food that they do not have to work anymore. It is expected that the servant will work every day for the rest of his life.

Likewise, God gives us what we need for each day, one day at a time. In return, we are expected to do the work of the kingdom until the day we die. When do the servants eat? Every day. And they eat food sufficient for that day.

At times, as Christians, we may feel like we’ve worked hard, done all we can do, given it our best. Maybe we even get a little tired sometimes. We’ve exhausted ourselves for the Lord, for the Church, and for our faith. Surely we deserve a rest.

Alison L. Boden writes, “I have read that Dorothy Day, a co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement and an extraordinarily faithful laywoman, was often approached by people who said things to her like, ‘You are a saint,’ ‘You are so special – a true gift of God as a person.’ She hated that! She was quite gruff with those who suggested these things. She’d say, ‘No, I’m not! I’m no different from you. If you value what I do, go do it yourself. You could, you know.’ She detested any language that set her apart from others because she saw it as a cop-

out, a way for people to rationalize why they were not more devoted to easing the suffering of the poorest.

“The disciples were this way – they saw before them what their faithfulness would require and declared that they didn’t have enough faith to consider such choices. ‘Excuses, excuses,’ Jesus tells them. We say, ‘I don’t have enough faith to be that kind of person, the kind of person who...[fill in the blank.]’ Jesus says, ‘Sure you do.’”

In today’s reading from Luke, the disciples are indifferent to others. They believe that they should be served because they are special people. Jesus sets them straight. They are servants. God is the master. They must continue to do the work of the kingdom.

The same is true for you and for me. Whether we are indifferent to the needs of others or just too tired to care, God still calls us to lives of service. Our work isn’t done until we die.

We receive no special reward for our work. We receive no “brownie points” or “gold stars” on our foreheads. The work we do is expected of us as servants of the kingdom. We are simply carrying out God’s orders.

Sometimes it’s not that we want to avoid our kingdom duties, it’s that we feel inadequate to the task. Madeleine L’Engel writes, “Slowly I have realized that I do not have to be qualified to do what I am asked to do. That I just have to go ahead and do it, even though I can’t do it as well as I think it ought to be done. This is one of the most liberating lessons of my life.”

III. The Servant King

This idea that we are servants, called to serve regardless -- It’s an uncomfortable message! We like to talk about the rewards and benefits of following Jesus. This teaching about servants isn’t much fun. Why should we serve a God who treats us like servants?

But, of course, we instantly remember that our faith is based on the example of God's only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. He gave up his claim as Master of the Kingdom in order to be a servant for our sakes. He suffered and died for us, not because he had to, but because he chose to. When we decide to follow Jesus, we decide to follow him all the way to the cross. When we choose to live a Christ-like life, we choose to live as Christ lived – serving others.

Alvin Rueter describes it this way in his book, Freedom to Be Wrong.

“Ask any parent who gets up at 2:00 a.m. and then at 3:00 a.m. and then at 3:30 a.m. to answer the cry of a sick baby. Lovers never ask, "What's the least I can do?"

“Ask any man whose income is so limited that after he pays his rent and buys his groceries he has only pennies to spare. But his sweetheart has a birthday the next month and he has his eye on something that means he'll have to go without lunch for three weeks. So he buys it.

“Boys' Town near Omaha has made capital off a poster showing a little guy toting a tyke nearly as big as he is, saying, 'He's not heavy; he's my brother.'

“Are any of these lovers looking for a medal? No. They're only doing their duty. And it's only natural.

“Our relationship to Christ is like that. For although Jesus may have been cracking a small joke when he portrayed how ludicrous it could have been if the master served the slave, yet that ridiculous reversal of roles is just what took place in the Upper Room when the Master served the disciples, washing their feet. It was symbolic of his entire ministry, including the cross.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson said this of duty: “There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better or worse as his portion...”

“It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

“A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds...”

I like this quotation from Emerson. It reminds me that no one but God can tell us what our duty is. We can listen to the advice of others if we want to. But ultimately our responsibility is to God. There are always “those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it.” In Twelve Step lingo we call that “taking someone else’s inventory.” It is important that we each focus on our own inventories and leave it to others to determine what their duty is before God.

Closing.

I close with the words of Frederick Buechner. He writes, “The old prayer speaks of God ‘in whose service is perfect freedom.’ The paradox is not as opaque as it sounds. It means that to obey Love himself, who above all else wishes us well, leaves us the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become. The only freedom Love denies us is the freedom to destroy ourselves.”

“God, in whose service is perfect freedom” – that is Jesus’ teaching in a nutshell. When we choose to become servants of God, we are perfectly free. As we gather around the Table of Our Servant King today – as His beloved children! -- may we celebrate our perfect freedom, and the perfect freedom of Christians around the world.

Amen.