

Sunday October 6th, 2019

17<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

**PRAYER:** O Lord, rekindle your spirit within us; make us burn with your power and love. Increase our faith; set us ablaze with courage, that we might fulfill our calling before you and our neighbours-not simply because you command it, but because we demand it of ourselves. Amen.

**OFFERTORY CALL:** All that we have and ever hope to have, is a gift and a trust from God. The Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 4:2 that as stewards of what God has entrusted to us, we have only one responsibility. Paul writes, “Stewards are expected to show themselves trustworthy.” Let us demonstrate that we are worthy of God’s trust in giving us worldly goods as we offer to God our tithes and offerings.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O Christ our Saviour; it was you who sensed the danger of depending on others but did not hesitate to brave that danger. It was you who knew intimately the pain of rebuking friends but who did not hesitate to risk that pain. It was you Loving Lord, who counted the cost of discipleship but did not hesitate to pay the cost: O how we adore you. You are our Lord, before whom we bow in awe and gratitude, and our teacher, to whom we turn in need and expectation. As you have taught us the meaning of lordship, teach us now the meaning of discipleship; teach us what it means to be members not simply of the church but of your body.

This is not our first time we have approached you as disciples seeking guidance. We have approached you many times, and each time you heeded our request. But we did not always heed your counsel. You urged us to honour those who serve God by sharing their faith, but we coveted the honour for ourselves. You reminded us to warn against the consequences of evil deeds, but we feared the scorn of evildoers. You exhorted us to treat all persons alike, in the world as in the church, but we played favourites in the church as in the world. You have never failed us Lord; we have failed you.

So, we come to you, asking for another chance-not a second chance but a third, fourth or a number that is beyond our remembering. We ask for the grace to hear and to heed your voice; for the fortitude to confront and correct our friends; for the determination to respect and rely on others; and for the courage to count and to pay the cost of discipleship. We are not ignorant of the demands of discipleship, but we have not done justice by our knowledge. Help us, O Christ, to do as well as we know and, better yet, to do the greater works you promised we would do.

We thank you, dear Lord, for greeting us as brothers and sisters; for making us disciples to one another, that we might minister to one another in your spirit. Grant us the grace to be open to one another, so that when one rejoices, we all rejoice, and when one suffers, we all suffer. As the world learned of your lordship by your love for us, let the world learn of our discipleship by our love for one another. Rekindle within us the gift of God; stir within us the spirit of power! Bless us, and in faith and love we will proclaim your truth.

**BENEDICTION:** The road is long. Let us walk it with integrity of heart-seeking God and scorning evil; loving good and loathing corruption; rendering justice and righting wrong. Let us walk confidently in the power of heaven, remembering one another constantly in our prayers and honouring one another continually with our lives. Amen.

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17<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

Luke 17:5-10

“Patting Yourself on the Back”

I begin today with perhaps the oldest question humankind has ever wrestled with. A question so steeped in speculation that no two people seem to agree on the answer. It is a perplexing question, which has created millions of sleepless nights, ruined relationships and led to countless books in an attempt to answer this age-old conundrum. Here it is; are you ready to hear it? What, pray tell, do women want from men?

Now come on guys, you know you have asked this question on more than one occasion and despite the best efforts of the women in our lives to educate us, we still haven't the foggiest idea what you ladies really want. Well, as a public service to at least begin to solve this age-old problem, I have found what could be the answer from Lisa Kogan, who wrote an article "*Lisa Kogan tells All,*" which appeared in O magazine in October 2006.

*Kogan wrote, "Every now and again, we want somebody else to pick the restaurant, arrange the play date, plan the seating, buy the tickets, do the laundry, schedule the appointment, pack the bags, balance the books, send the gift, walk the dog, fill out the forms, break the silence, lift the ban, make the payment, count the calories, hold the phone, explain the joke, beat the odds, hit the ground running, win the race, and save the day while we sleep past noon in high-thread-count sheets and a cashmere blanket. In other words, we want time off for good behaviour."*

Is that really what women want from men? Actually, as I read Kogan's remarks I couldn't help but realize that I want the same thing. I too, want time off for good behaviour. I too, want someone to appreciate what I do; even if what I do is the simple routines of life. Did anyone notice that I: did the dishes, took out the trash, did the laundry, cooked dinner, emptied the litter box, did the banking and even vacuumed the rugs? It is so easy to get resentful over the fact that no one appreciates what we do.

Where in the world is the gratitude? Even when we make an effort to gain some appreciation, it seems so often to fail. A woman may try a new hair style or new dress, only to have her husband not even notice. A man might help out by washing the kitchen floor only to have his wife not even say thank you. What, in the world, must one do to be appreciated? Where is the reward for all our sweat and toil?

Honestly now! Is that really how the world is supposed to work? Are we really in the business of being: spouses, parents, grandparents, neighbours or church members, only so we can get credit? The greatest danger to us however, is when we start applying this appreciation driven economy to our relationship with God; and please don't try and deny we haven't done this, or at least contemplated this.

The reasoning often goes something like this, "Well God, I have prayed regularly for years. I go to church every week. I tithe and even give some extra beyond ten percent. I am good to my family, my cat and my neighbours can count on me: so, God, because I have been so good and done my duties, how about healing my sick relative."

Sunday October 6th, 2019  
17<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

Or maybe we think, because we have been such a responsible Christian we should get: the job promotion, the house we always wanted, the new car or whatever our hearts desire. This kind of thinking goes back to that old erroneous idea that God can be somehow manipulated into showering blessings on us simply because we do what we are supposed to do. Pagan religions used to follow this procedure.

They believed that if they sacrificed their first born or threw a virgin into a volcano, their god of choice would smile on them. God, however, is never indebted to anyone and no matter how much we may try and: plead, negotiate or coerce God; there is no cosmic bartering system in which we can buy blessings. To make this point clear to everyone listening, Jesus tells a parable.

Suppose a servant has spent all day plowing fields in the hot sun or taking care of his master's sheep. The servant is very tired, sunburned, hungry and thirsty. He would like nothing better than just sit down at his master's table and chow down on some food, but this is not the case. Before he even gets to nibble on a cracker, the servant must prepare his master's dinner.

Now, perhaps we have missed something in this little parable because of a cultural setting. In Jesus' day the meal table was a powerful symbol. It is no accident that we gather around the Lord's Table today. The master's table was the defining location of who was and was not considered family. It would be very presumptuous for a servant to simply sit down and assume he was a part of the family or equal with his master.

Actually, the family dinner table may be more important than we thought. In the Toronto Star on Thursday September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2007 an article appeared, quoting an American study which revealed something we may have suspected all along. The study found that teens that ate dinner with their families five or more times a week were less likely to use drugs, smoke, or drink alcohol than peers who ate with their families twice a week or less.

The article goes on to say that 84% of the teens surveyed would prefer to have dinner with their parents. The study's authors write, "These are teenagers whose parents will tell you they are difficult and don't want to talk. This is not the sense we are getting from the kids themselves. They prefer it." Suffice it to say, that even today, the family dinner table is: important, significant to family unity and a powerful symbol.

Perhaps the closest we could get to something similar as the parable describes, would be a scenario where we were to work hard all day and at the end of the day, we were tired, and ravenously hungry. Upon getting home, we discover that there is nothing readily available to eat without considerable preparation, so we decide to go out for supper. At the restaurant, we order our meal and the waiter goes off to tell the kitchen what we want.

After a little while, the waiter returns with two sets of cutleries, two glasses of water, two cups of coffee, two napkins and sets the table for two people, but you are sitting there alone. You think that that is a bit odd and the waiter has made a mistake but shrug it off.

Sunday October 6th, 2019

17<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

After a short while, the waiter returns to your table with not only your dinner, but an extra plate of food. The waiter then sits down across from you and begins to eat at your table. The waiter, in between bites asks how your day went, how the family is, and maybe how your love life is going. You sit there in stunned silence. How can this be you wonder; I am the customer, the waiter is supposed to serve me, not sit at my table?

How very presumptuous, this waiter is. How presumptuous indeed. Jesus though, isn't finished with his parable. Not only does the servant not get to sit at the master's table or eat until the master is fed, but he isn't even thanked for working all day in the hot sun or for making the master's dinner. "What an ingrate", we might think. Doesn't the master realize the effort this servant has put out?

In English we have an idiom which fits here; couldn't the master have "thrown the poor man a bone?" Maybe just this once, the master could have let the man sit at his table, or make his own dinner first, or perhaps at least he could have simply said thank you. Shouldn't he have been granted as Kogan suggests, "Time off for good behavior". Jesus replies to this line of thinking that if we feel this way, we have got it all wrong.

Why, should the servant receive any special blessing from his master for doing what he was supposed to do anyway? The servant was doing what a servant does and simply being a servant does not obligate the master to anything, not even an expression of gratitude. The servant has no grounds for any expectation on the master, or any sense of equality with the master. Jesus' hearers, who were familiar with masters and servants, would have understood this point clearly; that's how the world works.

"In the same way", Oh, Oh! Whenever Jesus goes on to say "In the same way", we know the other shoe is going to drop, "In the same way, when you obey me you should say, 'we are not worthy of praise. We are servants who have simply done our duty.'" I am sure the disciples stood in stunned silence. I am sure that inside them a little voice had been telling them that if they remained faithful to Jesus, they would surely get a great reward.

However, as we learn from this parable, our relationship with God in Christ doesn't work that way. God cannot be bought by our piety. Every blessing, every good thing, every meaningful relationship is a gift of grace from God. We do not deserve it, nor can we demand it, because it is simply a free gift. When our master Jesus invites us to his table, it isn't because we have done some amazing work in his name but because he loves us and wants us with him.

Jesus is certainly consistent if nothing else. In Matthew chapter six, in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns about the nature of rewards when he states,

*Take care! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired, because you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. When you give a gift to someone in need, don't shout about it as the hypocrites do-blowing trumpets in the synagogues and streets to call attention to their acts of charity! I assure you; they have received all the reward they will ever get.*

Sunday October 6th, 2019

17<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

*But when you give to someone, don't tell your left hand what your right hand is doing. Give your gift in secret, and your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you. (Matt. 6:1-4)*

It is all about significance. We all want to know that we are special; probably we want to feel we are more special than someone else. It is pride and vanity that would allow us to even consider our righteousness as being nothing more than filthy rags before God. That is exactly how God describes our futile efforts to claim our own justification by our works in Isaiah 64:6.

*"We are infected and impure with sin. When we proudly display our righteous deeds, we find they are but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall."* That's quite a sobering thought to hear; that our "good works" are like autumn leaves that wither, dry up and blow away. All that effort to do what we conceive as being good works, and here all along it influences God not one iota.

I read a story that told about a husband and wife who met with a marriage counselor about their irreconcilable differences. The husband explained, "Ever since we were married, my wife has set out to change me. She convinced me to stop smoking, drinking, and staying out all night at parties.

She got me to dress well and to enjoy fine dining, classical music, and the ballet. She even taught me to save money and to invest my savings." The counselor considered all these sudden changes and then suggested, "It sounds like you may be experiencing latent bitterness toward your wife for so many behavioral changes at one time." The husband disagreed with the counselor. "Oh no, not at all. I like the changes. It's just that I have improved in so many ways that I now think, I am too good for this plain woman."

Shall we be honest with ourselves, that there is at least a small part of us that is like that husband when it comes to how we think God should view us? In all sincerity, we make the changes we know we must, to live as God wants us to, and then we adopt a posture of sitting back and expecting the blessings to just role in.

Maybe we have gone so far as to think we are too good for God. Oh, that's something we would never say out loud, heaven forbid, but we might think it anyway. That like James and John we feel we have somehow earned the right for that privileged right or left-hand spot at the master's table. In Phillip Yancey's book entitled *Prayer*, Yancy makes the point that prayer, above everything else, is a realignment of one's truthful place in God's world.

"Prayer helps correct myopia", Yancy writes, "calling to mind a perspective I daily forget. I keep reversing roles, thinking of ways in which God should serve me, rather than vice versa...Prayer raises my sight beyond the petty circumstances of life to afford a glimpse of that lofty perspective. I realize my tininess and God's vastness, and the true relation of the two. In God's presence I feel small because I am small." (Pg. 21-22)

Sunday October 6th, 2019  
17<sup>th</sup> after Pentecost

Later on, Yancy reminds his readers of the command of the Psalmist (Psalm 46:10) who wrote “Be still and know I am God.” The Latin imperative for “be still” is the word *vacate*. As Simon Tugwell explains, “God invites us to take a holiday [vacation], to stop being God for a while, and let him be God.” (Yancy-Prayer, Pg. 25-26) Jesus is speaking today about knowing our place and not elevating ourselves to an importance we just don’t have.

Perhaps that was why the disciples clamoured for more faith. They begged Jesus, “Tell us how to get it”, as if any effort on their part could gain them one speck of faith. “Even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘May God uproot you and throw you into the sea’, and it would obey you.” Do you see Jesus point? Miracles, faith, salvation have nothing to do with us, but everything to do with God.

If you want mulberry trees to be uprooted or mountains thrown into the sea, then you can struggle your whole life trying to do it on your own strength and fail miserably. Or you can finally take a “*vacation*” and stop interfering with God being God. Remember that when we encounter God, we feel very small because we are very small, but the good news is that God loves us anyway and was willing to die to redeem us.

Come, all you who are tired of striving, struggling, feeling unappreciated and ignored. For unlike the master in the parable, our master has pulled out a chair and invited us to join him at his table, where he calls us his family.