Taking Our Place at the Table

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Third Presbyterian Church
October 6, 2013 (World Communion Sunday)
Luke 17:1-10

If you will allow me a point of personal privilege...my mom’s birthday would have been yesterday. We celebrated with a nice meal and an Ohio State football game, both of which she would have loved. We continue to miss her, and to grieve her death. And we continue to be thankful for her life and legacy. On behalf of my dad (who is with us) and all of us, we are grateful or your continuing prayers and support and acts of kindness.

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Every year, we mark the first Sunday of this full month of October in two ways. We celebrate not only communion, the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, but World Communion Sunday. Along with receiving the Pastor’s Emergency Fund offering as we do each communion Sunday to help meet the material needs of neighbors, we receive the Presbyterian Peacemaking Offering. That offering was born in a different era, the era of the Cold War and U.S.-Soviet tensions, when we were concerned about nuclear annihilation. This congregation adopted something called the Presbyterian Commitment to Peacemaking, whereby we pledged ourselves to do things that made for peace, in our city and communities, in our nation, and in the world. The Soviet Union is no more, but it certainly does not feel like our world is a safer place, does it? Your gifts to the offering will support national and international efforts, and a quarter of the offering will stay right here and support our growing and important efforts to address gun violence in Rochester. Give generously as you are able.

That we receive this offering for peace on World Communion Sunday is no accident, of course. Like faith itself, communion is no private affair. It is communal and collective and “political,” in the best sense of that word which has to do with the ways that people gather and how we live together.

We overlay communion, and the call to be peacemakers, upon the word this morning. Actually, we encounter the word and let it do its spiritual work on our lives. That’s what biblical authority means, not applying the so-called “rule” of the Bible to our lives as if it were a set of operating instructions, but, rather, reading the word, exploring the word, encountering and engaging the word, and letting it wash over us, and take us – you, and me, and all of us together – to the places we need to be taken to. And so we do today.

Jesus continues to teach his earliest followers. He tells them not to do anything to harm children. What does that mean for us today? He tells us to rebuke and correct those who sin. What does that mean for us today, when we are either quick to judge or loath to get involved? He tells us to forgive. And forgive. And forgive. And forgive. What does that mean for us today? Forgive others, in our personal lives, in the life of the culture. Forgive ourselves. What would forgiveness look like? The disciples realize how hard
that is and they ask for more faith. Perhaps that’s our takeaway this morning, not that we need more faith, which we do, but that we are given more – we grow in faith – when we ask for it, when we recognize our need and simply ask.

And then Jesus tells this odd little story. We won’t dismiss it, or gloss over it. Your slave comes in from working in the field, Jesus says. And you wouldn’t say, come join me for dinner. You would say, prepare my meal, and eat later. You wouldn’t thank the slave for doing what the slave was supposed to do, Jesus says. There would be no thanks for simply doing what we are called to do.

There are things that Jesus says that I understand and appreciate. There are things he says that I do not understand and seek to appreciate. There are things he says that I understand and say to myself “I wish he had not said that.” Many have something to do with money, though this morning’s forgiveness message falls in that category as well. There are, finally, things he says that leave me baffled and confused.

He sounds harsh when he tells the disciples simply to do what they are expected to do with little in the way of thanks or gratitude. He does not say we have no place at the table, but the table certainly has a hierarchy, a pecking order, to it. If this were Downton Abbey, we all would be relegated to the basement with Carson and O’Brien and Bates while the Granthams and the Dowager Countess enjoyed the good life upstairs. And we’d be grateful for it nonetheless.

What is compelling, Charles Cousar asks, about an “unfeeling master and a slave who is not sufficiently acknowledged for his faithful service?” Do Jesus’ words militate against our own desires to feel worthwhile, or even the theological affirmation that we all have a place at the table, that we are all honored and cherished guests at Christ’s banquet? What is going on here? Are we the slave owner, as Jesus begins to suggest? Or are we the slave?

“The real issue,” Cousar writes, “is not how the boss treats the servant, but how the servant understands his role...The story reminds us of our place...God is God; we are God’s creatures – no more, no less.” (Texts for Preaching, Year A, pages 542-545)

Alan Culpepper writes that “the parable of the worthless servant is probably no one’s favorite, yet it drives us to reexamine our assumptions about our relationship to God. The difficulty is that while the parable makes a significant point about discipleship and humility before God, it casts God in the unappealing role of a slave driver.” (New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX, page 323)

And so we will wrestle with these words this morning, this day. We, of course, do not want to think of ourselves as servants, as slaves, as anything less than fully first-class citizens. Jesus is not saying that we are not. But Jesus is also not saying that we are God. We are not God. We are children of God. We are not the master. We are servants and slaves of the master.

We wrestle with that slavery concept not only for the historical freight that slavery image has in this nation’s history, but because we fancy ourselves independent, free, in control, “masters of our universe” as the novelist Tom Wolfe said a generation ago. But we are not. Our chief end, our tradition teaches us,
is to glorify God and enjoy God, not the other way around. That doesn’t mean we do not have a place at
the table. It means that our place at the table is a gift, not an achievement, something we receive, not
earn or accomplish. Our role, our task, is not to be God, but to be children of God, God’s grateful slaves,
servants, disciples, followers.

“Disciples are challenged to see themselves as servants,” Alan Culpepper writes. Whatever implications
there are this morning for us to accept that we are not in charge, not in control, there are more
significant implications for what it means to have a place at the table.

On this peacemaking, World Communion Sunday, our task is to accept that we have been given a place
at the table, even if we wrestle with the conditions. And by so accepting, we pledge ourselves to remind
others of that good news as well: whether guests at any of our outreach ministries, seeking food or
education or safety or shelter or companionship, or a politician given great responsibility, or a young
person unsure if they are loved or wanted.

If you have a place at the table and if I have a place at the table then we all have a place at the table. All
of God’s children. The table that is spread for us is spread for all, a world hungry and aching for even a
glimmer of hope, on this communion, peacemaking Sunday. Amen.