

**The Table is Set**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**World Communion Sunday**  
**10-6-2019**  
**Luke 17:1-10**

Jesus said a lot of things. The writer of Matthew attempted to give us a thesis by having a scribe ask Jesus, “What’s the greatest commandment?”

He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Luke’s gospel, like the others, tells the story of how Jesus implemented this love of God and neighbor against the backdrop of brutal Roman occupation. What Jesus asked the original disciples to do, (and he still asks us to do as well!), was to live every moment with this kind of love. That’s not an easy thing. For anyone. It takes intentionality. And discipline. And leadership. And selflessness. And it’s the kind of living and loving that has to be done minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, year by year, so that it becomes consistent, infectious, and eventually transformative.

Jesus, from the very beginning, recognized the ability and potential of the disciples to live and love in a manner similar to him, wholly attuned to the needs of God and neighbor. Jesus also knew that he would soon face capital punishment for this lifestyle, and his friends would need to take up his mantle.

In today’s passage, Jesus warns the disciples what to expect in the years ahead.

A millstone around a neck is not the most warm and fuzzy image to choose, so let me see if I can clean it up a bit for you. Jesus says good leaders, the ones who live lives of love, are both accountable and forgiving. It will be incumbent on the disciples to teach the ones they meet how to love, how to honor God, how to help facilitate and grow and nurture the God movement that Jesus has started. And it will also be incumbent on the disciples to be people of empathy and compassion – they need to

be willing to forgive seven times daily (that's fifty times a week if you are keeping score at home!).

I wish the author of Luke would have used the image of parent, or teacher, or coach to get Jesus' point across. The disciples, much like each of these authority figures, had been entrusted to prepare the next generation of followers. They were accountable to make God's will known to those whom they met. They were charged with sharing their gifts, and being tangible examples of the beloved community. And they were charged to be patient and forgiving, not only with the neophytes they took under their wings, but also with one another.

In today's passage, the disciples wrestle with the reality and the enormity of a such a calling. "We're gonna need a lot of faith to fulfill our responsibilities." they say.

"Actually, no," Jesus says. "It doesn't take but just an itty-bitty amount of faith to do miraculous things. A spec of faith the size of a mustard seed could take one look at the unruly holly in your front yard (the one that's too tall to cut with a ladder), and say 'jump up, be unrooted, and plant yourself in the sea. And off that holly would go, no landscaper needed.' You've got plenty of faith for what I am asking you to do."

Now I don't love millstones and mulberry bushes as metaphors. But I really don't like our third metaphor of slavery. Let's first be clear that this passage is not an endorsement of slavery, but more so a reflection of the labor system of its day. I want to parse out some meaning from an outdated, and frankly unnecessary metaphor. And then I'll say a word more about the metaphor itself.

Jesus, again, in not-so-warm-and-fuzzy terms, or perhaps Luke's author, speaking for Jesus in in not-so-warm-and-fuzzy terms, reminds the disciples that while they are more than equipped both in giftedness and faithfulness to be leaders, they also should not expect to find extra reward or compensation for their efforts. In other words, they should not expect more for simply doing what's required of them. The master doesn't throw a dinner party for the slave who is commanded to labor in the field. Nor should the disciples expect a bonus for doing as God calls them to do.

On the surface, this list of warnings about the life ahead of them feels rather crusty and cold. You will be accountable. You will be compassionate. You will be humble. You will do what's expected of you. You'll receive fair compensation, but certainly not more. And you'll like it!

Try putting that advertisement on ZipRecruiter.Com! How many takers would you find in this economy?

But that's the thing. Jesus isn't preparing the disciples to be successful in Caesar's world. Jesus is preparing the disciples to be themselves in God's world. In other words, Jesus is preparing them to find their created purpose as children of God.

In Caesar's world, older brothers remain jealous of younger brothers who squander inheritances, and yet still, somehow, receive a banquet, complete with a fatted calf. In God's world, older brothers forgive and rejoice, because they know all that is God's is theirs, too.

In Caesar's world, busy travelers ignore stranded Samaritans, because, quite frankly, it's not in their paygrade. In God's world, travelers know that they can only love God, and they can only love themselves, if they also love their neighbors. Such love is not a burden, such love is a responsibility and a calling.

In Caesar's world, wealth and domination facilitate change, and money's what moves those mulberry bushes. In God's world, faith is the commodity. And it bears fruit in a million tiny acts of love rippling through the enough-ness of neighbors.

I believe that when we read this text through the lenses of God rather than Caesar, we distill its harshness, and instead find comfort. When we love others, and trust in such a love, what need have we to fear of being capable to do the things of love: accountability, forgiveness, humility, satisfaction in enough-ness, community? And what a world it can be when we decide to harness our mustard seeds!

Back for a moment to the text's use of slavery as a teaching metaphor. I think it's important that we resist the urge to simply label this inclusion an unfortunate bi-product of first-century Palestine – "It was just the way of the world." No. Slavery, then as it is now, has always been offensive.

The truth is we cannot yet dismiss its offensiveness, because we still feel the pain, evil, sin, corruption, nonsense, injustice, and Godlessness of the institution. The effects of slavery are still felt today, especially in the systematic injustices born out in wealth distribution, inequitable housing, implicit racial bias, and too many other symptoms to name. And this week, our justice system reminded us of its hypocrisy: the same graces, spaces, and dignities given to people with white skin are routinely denied to persons of color. And rather than acknowledge such inequity, and vow to

make changes – graces, good wonderful graces, enough to be shared by all – the privileged scramble, scratch, and claw to keep their thumbs applied to the scales.

And as we come to the table this morning, one that's supposed to be global, and inclusive, and representative of all, I am struck by Jesus' warning. We come to such a table with responsibility, and accountability, and forgiveness, and faith, and no expectation of extras for doing what's required of us. We come to the table, called to love God and love neighbor as we love ourselves.

If we are serious about such a calling, we must begin to do the hard work of reconciliation; we must begin to love without expectation that our whiteness, that our maleness, that our riches, that our health, that our intellect, that our luck, that our fate, that our education, that our stability, that our normalization, that ANY of the markers of our privilege should afford us more in the community of God's enough-ness.

We must take accountability, becoming agents of generosity and humility. We must be leaders, not in our ability to forgive others, but in our willingness to ask forgiveness of those whom we so recklessly wound, intentionally or unintentionally. And we must believe in our faith – I promise you there's plenty of it – in order that we might be the reflection of the God who offers balm to wounded Samaritans; who runs with open arms to meet children who have veered off course; who finds her lost coin and throws a party; who seeks her missing sheep, even when 99 are in the fold; who offers bread and wine to all who breathe life; who loves, always, no matter the circumstance.

Good friends, God's table awaits. May we meet the One we follow there. And at this table, may we find strength to be the people God calls us to be.

Amen.