

Scripture**Luke 17: 5-10****(NRSVUE)**

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶ The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

⁷ "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? ⁸ Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me; put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? ⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!' "

I don't think there is much doubt in my mind – and probably not in any of those who know me. World Communion Sunday has got to be one of my favorite Sundays in the entire year. Few Sundays come close. For those of you who have never experienced World Communion Sunday with us before, I believe you are in for a treat.

Don't get me wrong. I love Easter. I love Pentecost. I love Christmas.

And I certainly enjoy celebrating communion every month. Communion is one of our most sacred and holy celebrations. I love the way we proclaim God's grace in this acted out parable, this sacrament in which we get a glimpse of God's love for us and experience a foretaste of the great heavenly banquet that awaits us.

World Communion Sunday brings an added element to it. It reminds us that there are other people in the world who share this feast with us – even on this side of heaven's shore. And for over 10 years now, I have celebrated World Communion Sunday using a wide variety of breads to remind us of those who celebrate with us. In the interest of all concerned, we take together a gluten-free version at our communion time and are saving the other breads for your personal choice and consumption at coffee hour!

I think it was in 2015 when I first tried to do something different with World Communion Sunday. That year I set tables and chairs near the altar. I invited people in the small congregations where I was serving to sit at a table to share communion. My purpose in doing so was to remind us all that the small piece of bread and the limited amount of grape juice we drink has its origins in an actual meal, a meal eaten at a real table.

Rather than being the pastor who simply said a prayer and offered a small sample of bread to people, I became servant, the one who brought food to the table for others to enjoy.

I remembered that October day from years ago as I read today's text.

I also remember many different experiences I've had when I either sat at a table or served people who were sitting at a table. How many of you have ever worked as a server?

One of my first memories of being a "waiter" was as sole parent to my 4 children, when I tried to make breakfast. I may have overcooked the eggs I know I burned the toast. But the part of the story that my children may tell all of these years later is how it tasted.

They waited until I was out of the room before they spit it out. If the goal was for them to have a memorable meal, I was hugely successful! That was over 30 years ago, and they still remember it!

And that wasn't the last time I served as a servant – although I've since made significant improvements in my abilities both to cook and to serve. I think!

Truth be told, however, I have been served far more often than I have been the servant, sometimes sitting at numerous tables and been waited on. I have had people bring me meals and drinks as a guest in homes and restaurants. I have had servers serving me who wore fancy white jackets, and I have had servers who wore simple aprons over plain dresses.

As I'm sure you've experienced, sometimes I felt welcome because of the hosts who sat at the table with me, while at other times it was the server who made me feel welcome.

There have also been times when I experienced poor service. I remember walking out of a restaurant once because it took too long for the staff to return with our food. And in one church where I served, I felt like walking out when no one sat with us – in fact, we were accused of being rude even though we were the first in the room and the first to take our seats, accusing us of being rude by assuming we chose not to sit with them.

In the parable today, Jesus invites us to sit at the table with him. He asks his audience what they would expect to happen if they were masters who came in from the fields and sat down to eat. They all knew the right answer: they would expect their workers to do their jobs. It might be nice if they went above and beyond their duty, but there was no need to thank them for simply doing their job (Lk. 17:9), “Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?”

Now there is admittedly a huge cultural difference between their world and ours. We may not really know what it means to have a slave – or to be one. But we can get close to some of the sense he is speaking about when Jesus talks about someone bringing us our meal. Whether it is our mother or our husband or our child, whether we are at a restaurant, a catered banquet, or a church potluck, we all know what it means to have someone bring us our meal.

So, after setting the stage where we see ourselves being served by our others, Jesus turns the story around. It’s a dramatic twist in which Jesus literally turns the tables and asks us to think of ourselves as the servants rather than the masters (Lk. 17:8, 10).

This isn’t just a “do unto others” reminder. We know the difference between the servers who have gone above and beyond expectations and those who barely do what they are told to do. And for some of us, that affects the size of the tip we leave at a restaurant.

From the perspective of someone who can make that kind of a judgment, however, Jesus asks us to measure our own obedience to God. Perhaps asking, 'What kind of servant have you been?' The unfortunate reality is that even at our best "you have done all that you were ordered to do" (Lk. 17:10). I don't know about you, but it isn't always true that I have done what I ought to have done, either. There have been times – too many, in fact – when I know I have done less than was asked of me, and far less than I am capable of doing.

We enter the story with a sense of smugness about what it means to be served and then are reminded that we have failed in our service to others.

Ouch! It hurts!

Isn't it interesting, though, that Jesus tells this story in response to the question of how to increase faith (Lk. 17:5) The answer seems to be that we have enough faith already. The question is whether or not we are willing to use it.

You see, one way to read Jesus' parable about "mustard seed" faith is that Jesus says "if" in the same sense that we might use the word "since." "*If* you had faith the size of a mustard seed," can also be read, "*Since* you have faith the size of a mustard seed" (Lk. 17:6).

It's as if he is saying we already have faith. We have more than enough faith. But we would rather move mountains than live in obedience. We would rather make a name for ourselves and our church than we would serve and care for people in need.

It occurred to me that maybe on this day, on World Communion Sunday, we could learn to be servants, to learn how we can serve

those whom God has invited, serving others rather than relishing our position as invited guests.

When the disciples ask – when we ask – to have more faith, Jesus has the same answer: go and serve. We already have faith to do that. Clearly God is the host. Today, Jesus invites us all to the table. But we are both invited guests and indebted servants.

Thanks be to God. Amen!