

## **Sermon, 7 October 2007—Proper 22**

Habakkuk 1:1-13; 2:1-4; Psalm 37; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Dear sisters and brothers, in a couple of weeks we will have been together for a year. We are—or ought to be—well on the way towards discovering if being fellow servants in this household is something we want to affirm and confirm by covenant. We are—or ought to be—beginning to realize whether or not Christ’s ministry of reconciliation, which we have been given to share here, is increasing in clarity and energy and hope. We are—or ought to be—starting to notice whether our shared ministry results in our turning towards the future with confidence or with misgiving, with eagerness or with resignation, with enthusiasm or with reservations.

Next week, our bishop will be with us. Whether or not he addresses these matters directly, he will be scanning and probing to know our hearts. As our chief pastor, he will want to know that all that is good here is being nurtured and that whatever is grieving here is being consoled. As the symbol of the unity of this diocese, he will want to assure himself that all that is generous and just here is reaching beyond our own boundaries to serve those in need and to engage our region. As the person charged to guard the doctrine and discipline of this church, he will want to build up our faithfulness and our readiness to render an account for the hope that is in us.

So, given where we are together, Jesus’ terse parable struck me forcefully. Once again, he has told a dangerous and offensive story. The story is offensive, of course, because most of us react with distaste when slavery is presented as an image of discipleship; and these slaves’ words at the end of the story stink more with humiliation than humility. That recommended self-abnegation which Jesus puts in their mouths just gets our back up. The story is

dangerous, though, because of the number of false turns that we can make as we try to find our way through it. It strikes me as utterly antithetical to what most 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians consider their acceptable and desirable place in the church to be.

Dear friends, I have only become more and more aware over these past months of how deeply invested many of you are in this place. In so many ways, at so many times, there are people here who keep this place open and clean and beautiful, who keep each other reassured and encouraged and safe and cared for, who keep our common life bountiful and inventive and even delicious. It is like the household in the parable, where all those whose life is incorporated there have multiple duties which combine to build together a warm and strong and welcoming common good.

But I am also struck by some fragility here. We cannot sustain our financial situation. Even though we received for this year the most generous reduction of diocesan dues in the entire diocese, that support cannot be extended indefinitely. At times I wonder if we can sustain our ministries. Even though I meet with a number of different groups here, I find myself sitting with the same people—and when one of them withdraws, the others are hard put to determine how that perspective and contribution might be filled. Exhaustion becomes demoralization, not because we are defeated, but simply because we are tired. Anxiety becomes despair, not because we cannot address the concerns, but simply because we fear we are alone. Investment becomes resentment, not because anyone is opposed to our efforts, but simply because we begin to feel used. Outstate Minnesota, I've discovered, is made up of stoic stock, so jobs get done with little complaint. But that, in the life of the Body of Christ, can become the highest risk of all, causing us to sink into silence and absence and isolation one from another, to lighten our hold of each other so

gradually, that when we finally let go we barely notice as we disappear. Because I know you so little yet, you know (putting it in Minnesotan), I fear for you. Tight lips falter at praise.

Consider this parable. Here the slaves return from plowing and are told they cannot eat yet, because they have more work to do. Not only that, there is no reason to thank them for what they have done, since they were only following orders; they were not doing anything at their own initiative for which they might be acknowledged—not that their initiative would be encouraged. Not only that, when all is done, they confess they are worthless slaves, who have only done what they ought to have done. I cannot imagine that there is anyone here who doesn't feel a quick twinge of offense at that. If that's the life in Christ, I think, I'll go see what they're serving on down the road. But if that is our response, we have missed something, because that cannot be Jesus' intention in telling this parable.

God did not create you to exhaust you. The Word of God did not become incarnate so that you might come to know resentment. Christ did not undergo the cross to increase your sense of anxiety. The Holy Spirit was not given to drive you to despair. This parable is full of places where we can take a false turn, in which we can misunderstand what it is to be the Church.

The first false turn is to arrive expecting to be fed. This is, speaking like C. S. Lewis for a moment, one of Screwtape's most cunning deceptions. It shows how fully we agree with the poisonous whisper that religion is a personal particular individual private matter—like our home is. I arrive exhausted and I want my restoration, my consolation, my compensation. Of course, in church I get a bad imitation of my favorite food, and a bad imitation of my favorite chair, and a bad imitation of my favorite music, so it's an uphill climb any way; and the sermon can't hold a candle to NPR.

But the parable suggests that what we ought to expect upon arrival at our household is a call to further service. The mistake was ours, dear friends, when we agreed with those Enlightenment philosophers that religion is not about God, but only about us, to improve us, to reassure us, to enhance us, and that it belongs in the home, where the women rear the children. The mistake was ours, dear friends, when we agreed with Barnes & Noble that we can be guided to prefer to browse through several widely diversified shelves of books or CDs on spirituality and self-help, which we can listen to alone in our car. The parable suggests that when we arrive at Church, there is someone here, after all, whom we serve together. There is a Power here greater than ourselves, who sustains us and nurtures us, yes, but who calls us to follow and who shows us that the greatest must be the servant of all. It is one thing to arrive expecting to be taken care of; you will leave resentful often. It is quite a different thing to arrive expecting a call to serve someone, though I simply do not yet know whom; you will never leave disappointed.

The same is true for the Church itself. The institution itself exists, not for its own sake, but for that of others: to equip its members, to bring its neighbors hope and joy, to proclaim what the poor would recognize and embrace as Good News, to praise and offer thanks to the One who gives us life and light and love. This is not your private club, but the living Body of Christ, still incarnate in the world for health and salvation.

Now, I have no sooner said all this, than, if you are like me, you face the second false turn: resentment. It seems to me that the greatest tragedy of our life is we cannot see past our sense of deprivation, our assessment of scarcity, our fear. These stoke our furnace of resentment: we don't have enough time, we don't have enough money, we don't have enough energy, we don't have enough members, we are stretched too thin, and what little we have is being

poured out in wasted effort. “And now this God, who if He were worth His salt would fix things and set them right, has come up with more after-school assignments,” we think; “it is too much.”

The parable-teller only says, “Life has no meaning except what we find in the gift of the self for the good of others. We spend our days trying to secure a self we cannot keep in any event; our person goes rancid when we try to preserve it intact and unaltered. What we begin to discover in the gift of self to self is the mutual interdependence of all things; we are made for each other. We can witness firsthand how another soul turns towards the light that is offered. We can see that we ourselves grow more vigorously when we prune and cultivate our self for the sake of each other. We discover that the gift of the self for the good of others gives back to us even a sense that life has purpose.”

Let’s suppose that the slaves of the parable, though, are not resentful, but dutiful. They take their tasks on with serenity, with easy surrender, with a sense of purpose and cool efficiency. All is performed with the lucid determined control that an overbooked schedule requires. That, of course, is the third false turn: the dance-steps memorized and produced rather than felt and enjoyed, and our life completed as an assignment.

The parable-teller only smiles and says, “You are still in bondage, even if it is only self-imposed. Duty is better than resentment, but can you do what you do for love? Can you serve because you delight in those you serve and truly want the best for them? Can even their foolishness and selfishness make you smile, because those create the occasion for yet another gift of understanding?”

That brings us to the fourth false turn, the one at the end of the parable. We confuse such a free-fall of love, when we feel weightless because we carry so little self-protection, with self-abandonment. The slaves in the parable even speak with self-deprecation. It can be disorienting to be that attentive to

another person. This fourth false turn is the erosion of self-worth. “We are worthless,” the slaves say. “Because our constant attention is service, framing our phrases and gestures for the sake of the person we are serving, our own sense of self grows thin and depleted.”

The parable-teller only smiles and says, “Love feels inadequate in the face of what it longs for always. When does the truly loving self ever think that it has given enough, encouraged enough, enjoyed enough of what it loves? The thinning out of the sense of self is the measure of our attention on what we are loving and serving. It is the sign that we are already moving beyond what we can manage and entering into the gift of the self. You want to be better than you are because you care so much; you want to be able to give a bigger gift, because you love so much. That thin feeling is the sign.”

The fifth and final false turn lies in the words of the slaves: “we are worthless; we have only done what we ought to have done.” There it is: “we... we...we—but at least we did what we were supposed to.” The relentless fixation on the self: what I did, what I should have done, and what my self-worth is based on what I have done.

The parable-teller only smiles and says, “The truth is, when you serve in love, you begin to discover it is not you at work at all, because you are doing what you could not have imagined doing on your own power. You could not have done even what you ought to have done if God had not been doing it in you and as you. Worthlessness is the aftertaste of doing nothing more than your duty, when you can do greater things than these, because with God, nothing is impossible.” In that faith, we can smile and say, “Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever.”