

October 2, 2016

St. Luke 17:1-10: ***“Our Duty as Christians”***

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever noticed that people are utterly shocked when you do the right thing? A store clerk doesn't notice that you have stuff underneath your cart, and when you were paying you didn't think about it either, so you leave the store and realize it when you are loading it into the car, and then you return to pay for it, only to see utter disbelief in their eyes! Have you every noticed that if you are nice or try to help someone they get real nervous and act as if you have an ulterior motive in mind? Or, a person administers care to someone in an terrible accident and they are called heroic. Have you ever done what you thought was the right thing to do, not that you necessarily really wanted to do it, but you ended up doing it anyway and then you pat yourself on the back for a job well-done?

In 2013, four young men in New Jersey went shopping. They needed batteries and cable for the stereo system in their dorm. They went into the store and found what they were looking for, but there wasn't anyone else there - no employees, no cashier. So after waiting a bit but no one coming out to help them, they left the money (including tax) for their purchase on the counter and left.

What happened, it turns out, was that the store was actually closed. The lock on the door had malfunctioned. But a store security camera recorded what they had done. The media caught wind of this and it became a story of no small renown and aired on both local and national news. These young men were brought onto shows as guests, applauded, and even given \$50 gift cards - just for being honest - just for doing what is right.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning cuts through all of this in a way that might be rather shocking to us, especially if we are in the habit of congratulating ourselves for doing the right thing. Jesus says:

“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty (Luke 17:7-10).’”

That's kind of hard to digest isn't it? When you do good and you help other people, you have done what you were supposed to do. When you resist temptations to sin and you love your enemies and forgive those who sin against you, even up to seven times a day or more, you have done what is expected. When you are faithful, kind, and compassionate, you have been what everyone should be. If you keep all of the commandments, you have only done your duty. No TV appearances. No cheers from a crowd. No \$50 gift card. You've only done your duty!

We have fallen far away from the hard truth haven't we? Doing what is right and loving is not just what Christians are supposed to do, but all people are supposed to be doing these things all the time out of pure love for God and others. To love is to give up ourselves, to even those who don't deserve it, with no

expectation of selfish gain. But, when we do what is right, we think we should get something for it, or we later look for a little return on our investment. A little *quid pro quo* - "I'll scratch your back, and you scratch mine" sort of thing. If I do this for God, he might do something for me. Or, maybe it just makes us feel good about ourselves when we do certain things. At least it proves that we're not as bad as other people, right? But, when we do good, and there is no return, or when it seems that we reap nothing but bad, it feels like we are being gypped. It is frightening to consider how self-absorbed we really are, isn't it?

It gets even worse. When God looks at humanity apart from him, he says in Psalm 53:3, "there is no one who does good, not even one." Furthermore, it also says in Isaiah 64:6, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags (a polluted garment). We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away." With words like those, we had better rub out of our minds any notion that somehow God owes us something because we are good people, or because we do good things. Why should he give us anything and why should he deliver us when even our very best - "all our righteous deeds" - are nothing but filthy rags? The words convey the true nature of human sinfulness and the impossibility of being perfect and saving ourselves. Why indeed should the Holy One of Israel help or save anyone?

No wonder then that Jesus comes along and says, "What do you expect? If there's a servant doing what the master tells him to do, does that servant really think to himself that the master will then become his servant? Will the master actually thank the servant for what is expected all along?" The picture is very down to earth and hard for us to accept. God is not on what we might call "a reward system." And there is quite a twist to all of this. Even though we cannot do anything righteous, nor can we save ourselves, yet out of his pure grace, and for that reason alone, he (the master) decides to become a servant in order to save and give us all good things. And isn't that what is truly captured when Jesus, having loved his disciples to the end, took off his outer garment, put a towel around his waist, and washed their feet?

You might remember that Peter objected to the whole thing and flatly said, "You shall never wash my feet!" From the context, Peter thought it would be beneath Christ to do such a thing, especially since he was the righteous Son of God. Peter was not grasping the fact that Jesus would have to wash his feet in order for him to be truly clean and acceptable in God's sight. Peter could not do such a washing for himself, and by such a good work thereby walk through the door into the clean house of heaven. And it certainly appears from the context that Peter thought that he could wash his own feet, "thank you very much." And Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me (John 13:8)." And that is the point! The master must do the washing of the servant because it is not for us to do. Listen to Jesus:

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (John 13:12-17).

Let me say it a little differently now. Jesus says in our Gospel lesson: "Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table?'" And yet, consider this wonder of wonders: Jesus our master speaks to us *unworthy* servants and invites us to recline and eat at his table in the kingdom of heaven! Again, Jesus said: "Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?" And yet, it is our master - our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - who rewards *unworthy* servants - servants who cannot keep the commands of God - by giving them his righteousness as he kept the commands for them and suffered on the cross for their failures. By grace through faith he gives us credit for all he has done. As it says, "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Romans 4:3)!"

The servants cannot "do their duty" without their master. We gather together in this sanctuary failing to do good, provoking others, failing to forgive, full of pride and selfishness, failing in every way, and our master serves us *unworthy* servants and gives us everything. He removes our filthy, sinful rags, washes us clean from our sins, dresses us with his righteousness, feeds us at his supper and even gives thanks to God for us. As he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit he said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will (Luke 10:21)."

It really puts it in a different perspective doesn't it? It is not that we do good and God owes us. It is not that we act and then God responds. Rather "everything is of Him, through Him, and to Him" as Paul writes (Romans 11:36). Indeed, we are *unworthy* servants! We have only done our duty, as it says in Ephesians 2:10, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10)." We have only done our duty!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott