

The Lowest Place

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Texts: Luke 17: 5-10

There was a lot to take in during the two weeks I spent in India about ten years ago. A towering, multi-story statue of Lord Hanuman, the Hindu monkey-god, complete with magnificent curling tail. Temples dedicated to terrifying goddesses with long tongues and fangs dripping blood. Delivery trucks and gas-powered rickshaws and bikes and cows and hand carts full of bamboo and chauffeured sedans all competing for road dominance, swerving in and out of traffic, honking continuously. I toured a slum made up of tiny cinderblock homes, with barefoot children running through the dirt lanes between them, strolled the packed antique streets of Old Delhi, busy with commerce, where vendors cooked street food over fire stoves. I gaped at the crazy tangle of power lines atop every electric pole, where neighbors had improvisationally tapped into the grid, helping themselves to free electricity.

Everywhere, sights and sounds and smells reminded me that I was far from home. But nothing startled and unnerved me more than going to visit a local Christian household and encountering actual servants. Now, I've been served many times in my life. I've been waited on in restaurants. I've been offered hors d'oeuvres by caterers, and tiny packets of pretzels by uniformed flight attendants. I've left rumpled sheets in motel rooms for the cleaning staff to collect. Being waited on is an everyday experience for many of us, baked into our American way of life. Besides that, I've read, nerd that I am, who knows how many hundreds of works of British fiction from the early 19th to mid-20th centuries—novels and stories from a time in which absolutely everyone from the middle class up had at least 1 or 2 daily or live-in servants to cook and clean. But none of any of this prepared me for the experience of coming face to face with real live household servants.

I can still feel the shock, still feel the rush of blood to my cheeks when I realized what was happening. I know it sounds over-dramatic, but I can't help it; it shook me. It shook my egalitarian spirit. I felt deeply uncomfortable. I had been taken to visit a local pastor; I wasn't expecting to be served tea by his maidservant. I'm sure our hosts had little idea what was passing through my mind. To them, it was all

normal, a part of everyday life. Just as slavery was, we know, an everyday part of life in Jesus' world. And without defending it in any way, I think it's important, given the traumatic history of slavery on our own continent, to at least be clear that what we're talking about in the ancient world was not that. It was miserable, it was low-status, it was dehumanizing, but it didn't single out any one group. It wasn't based on race. Slavery in the ancient world was a circumstance of fate, a misfortune that commonly befell criminals, prisoners of war, and people who had fallen into debt. It went all the way back to ancient Sumer - a/k/a the dawn of civilization—which is probably why no one questioned it. As far as anyone knew, it had always existed. It always would exist.

But even knowing that intellectually, when we hear this morning's passage, with that shocking word "slave"—Greek *doulos*—repeated over and over—by JESUS, of all people—well, it's very unnerving. How can he use this kind of language? Why doesn't he condemn slavery outright, instead of turning it into a story? And how about that last sentence—"worthless slaves"? We should think of ourselves as "worthless slaves"? What are we supposed to do with that? When I come across something like this in my Bible, I just want to turn and head in the other direction—just like I wanted to turn in the doorway of that home in Delhi and leave and shake the dust of that place off my feet.

But that's just evasion. It doesn't move me any closer to addressing whatever it was in the passage that triggered those strong feelings. Those feelings are important. We should start there. That's where Jesus is meeting us in the scripture today, right? In whatever in us is reacting so viscerally, with so much heat. There's life and movement in that conflict we feel: We're reacting to our world, we're reacting to history, we're reacting to our place in the big human mess—our skin color, our position in society, all that we carry from who we are and where we've been, all the work we've done to try to process our "stuff"... This is where Jesus is meeting us as we encounter this 2000-year-old story anew. Meeting us and drawing us deeper into God's unfolding purpose in history, just as our ancestors in faith were drawn before us. Here's the thing: I trust him. Even when he says provocative, uncomfortable stuff like what we heard today, stuff I really don't understand; I trust him with my heart, I trust him with my soul, I trust his quiet, subversive work in human history. I believe Mary when she proclaims that in Jesus, God is turning everything upside down, bringing the powerful down from their thrones, and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. It's not an imaginary, idealized world she's singing about. It's our world, weighed down by inequality, suffering, and sin. The

one we live in. The one we are called to serve, and not turn away from. So, let's ask: Who is Jesus addressing in this passage? Is he talking to actual slaves? No, he's teaching his disciples—clearly not slaves, since they're wandering freely around Galilee with Jesus. It's his disciples who are being instructed to put themselves in the place of the very lowest members of the social hierarchy. And if the language he uses here is jarring, the teaching is actually quite familiar. It comes up again and again throughout the gospels, especially Luke.

“When you are invited to a banquet,” Jesus says, “don't sit at the place of honor! Take the lowest place. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” “Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.” And echoing today's parable: “A dispute also arose among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

Again, and again, Jesus inverts the familiar order of his hearers' world—a world built on status, honor, and rigid ideas of social worth, a world where who gets to sit where at the banquet table speaks volumes about that person's value in society. Jesus turns all that on its head. The way into God's realm, he says, is through the servants' entrance. Okay, yes, sure—but “worthless”? Come on. Jesus is speaking directly to his inner circle here, and he's pulling out all the stops. And I think we know why. The gospels make no secret of the tensions among the disciples, the egos, the jockeying for position. They want to follow Jesus, yes, but they also want to be important! They want places of honor in this kingdom he's always talking about. They're hoping to be rewarded someday for their years of faithfulness trudging up and down Galilee doing the Lord's work. It's all very human and understandable. And it's exactly what Jesus is trying to break through. Because it's only when we get over our anxiety about ourselves that we can begin to be free.

Only when we start letting go of the tyranny of the insatiable “I” can we start to make room in ourselves for God—the one whose presence changes everything. Don’t think that because Jesus told stories about masters and slaves, that means he was okay with slavery. I think he saw captivity everywhere he looked—in every human life, in the desires and preoccupations of every human heart. Until our hearts are transformed, we can’t be a part of the transformation of the world. We can’t bring liberation to others until we ourselves are free. Free to let go of that relentless “I.” Free to step back, and let God fill the center of our inner world. Free to surrender any thought of “I’ve earned” or “I deserve” or “I have the right to” and all the other me-centering dialogs that run through our minds, holding us captive to our own finite egos, which can never give us what we most deeply need, can never feed our hunger for belonging and connection, can never answer those deep questions about our ultimate worth—they’re just egos! Neurons, really. We don’t need rewards and reassurances. We need God—our peace, our joy, our healing, our life.

Where do we find this God? At our feet, of course. With towel and basin. And that’s what turns this obnoxious parable of Jesus completely on its head. Who is the one who comes to us as the humblest of servants? It’s Jesus himself, God with us— reaching out to us from the lowliest, most unassuming place, inviting us into God’s own life of love poured out in blessing on the world. It is God who puts on her apron and serves, asking nothing in return, because that is how love is. The sweetness of love is already more than enough to fill every need and desire. “Have this mind in you that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul writes, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Throughout its long history, Christianity has often struggled to hold onto this paradox. Too often it has taken the human path, grasping for power, wealth, and domination. But it has never been able to quite eradicate the subversive power of the gospel first planted in first-century Galilee.

From early Christian times to present-day India with its strict caste system, the kin-dom of Jesus has drawn followers regarded as “worthless slaves” by others in their society, inviting them into God’s vision

of a world where no such distinctions exist, where all are of incomparable worth; all belong; all are beloved. Like a grain of mustard seed sown in the earth, seemingly too small and insignificant to make any difference, the spirit of the gospel goes on growing in secret wherever it is planted, changing the world by quietly transforming the people who live in it. And here we are, too. Just as we are. Here we are, and dinner is ready! Come now, and gather at the table, where Christ himself waits in his apron to serve the feast. Come eat and drink the meal he has prepared for us, God's feast of love, of liberation, of justice and joy. And may your heart, at long last, taste peace.

