



“The Servant’s Servant”
Scripture – Luke 17:5-10
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, October 6, 2019

Show of hands: How many Downton Abbey fans in the house?

In anticipation of the new Downton Abbey movie, I have been re-watching the original BBC series. It’s quite the escape, you know, to lose yourself in a bygone era, when hairdryers and refrigerators were newfangled contraptions, and a mid-week dinner-at-home required evening gowns and white tie apparel ... an age when tradition ruled the day and decorum was, well, Gospel. There’s a nostalgia to it, but also an uneasiness that comes with peering into a world where one’s social status so completely defines the course of one’s life.

For those who have better things to do with your time than watch Downton Abbey, let me tell you a bit about this show: It is set on an estate in the English countryside, where the Earl of Grantham lives with his wife and three daughters, and the dozen-or-so servants who attend to them. It follows the trials and triumphs of the Crawley family and of the household staff through the sinking of the Titanic, the outbreak of war in Europe, and the seismic cultural shifts of the early 1920s. But, despite the reforms that follow World War I, some things remain constant: namely, the social roles that govern the characters’ relationships with each other and the world around them.

While there is a certain, somewhat surprising, intimacy between the family and the staff who wait on them, there are very clear distinctions between the “upstairs” and “downstairs” worlds of Downton Abbey. Upstairs, the Crawley family lives in lavish comfort, rarely lifting a finger even to pour their own tea. Downstairs, the servants work from dawn ’til well-past-dusk to prepare meals and polish shoes and treat stains on dinner jackets. The household staff has a separate entrance and a separate staircase and — when they’re following the rules — they venture upstairs only when the bell summons them to service. And while the line between upstairs and downstairs is blurred, for instance, when the Earl’s youngest daughter runs off with the chauffeur, class distinctions define life in the Abbey.

Nowhere is the difference between the ones served and the ones serving more pronounced than around the table. In the dining room the family sits, decked out in jewels and jackets with tails, while the butler and footmen serve course after course, looking as presentable as possible in their liveries and gloves. *They* are the only servants allowed in the dining room; anyone else would be unsightly. But the distinctions don’t end there. Even in the basement of this great house, there is a hierarchy: After the family has dined, the butler and the housekeeper and the ladies maids and the footmen gather around the table in the servants’ hall to eat their own supper. Only after these servants are served do the cook and the kitchen maids get to eat dinner ... on their own, in the kitchen. In the world of Downton Abbey, everyone knows their place, and they know the exact table at which to find it.

This — this world of butlers and ladies maids and chauffeurs — is the kind of world in which the parable from today’s Gospel makes sense. Frankly, this parable seems more targeted to the Crawley family than to the fishermen and laborers and widows Jesus usually addressed. The Crawleys would know how to respond to the question Jesus poses: “Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat?’” “Of course not ...” the Earl of Grantham would reply, “... who ever heard of a servant dining with his master?!”

To be honest, the image at the center of this parable makes us uneasy ... much the way the hierarchy represented in Downton Abbey makes us uneasy. Our discomfort with this text only increases when we read it in the New Revised Standard Version, which is the version of the Bible we have in our pews. *That* translation refers not to servants, but to slaves, which is a term that conjures horrific images of chattel slavery in our own country. On the surface, this parable confounds at best and does damage at worst; it certainly makes no sense on the lips of One who has come to proclaim release to the captives. And then there’s that bit about the mustard seed and the mulberry tree, which appears to have nothing to do with the rhetorical questions that follow. All of which begs the question: What on earth is Jesus talking about?

Well, let’s dig a little deeper:

This passage comes right after some rather intimidating instructions on forgiveness. Jesus has just told his disciples how to treat a brother or sister who has wronged them. And it’s a high bar: “Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day —” Jesus says, “Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, ‘I am changing my ways,’ you must forgive that person” (Luke 17:4, CEB). Apparently discipleship requires a “bottomless well of forgiveness,” and Jesus’ followers aren’t sure they have the capacity for this kind of mercy.¹ The twelve are beginning to realize that this discipleship thing is demanding, and they’re worried they’re not up to the task. So they turn to Jesus and cry out, “Increase our faith!”

“Increase our faith!” It’s a request we can understand. It’s a request to which many of us can relate, especially on days when we — like those first disciples — worry that we’re not up to the task of following Jesus either. But, as it turns out, it’s not really the *right* request. Because faith is *not* something to be measured, or stockpiled, or traded in for supernatural powers. No, faith is something to be lived.

So Jesus shakes his head and smirks. *You don’t need more faith. Even this much faith is enough!* “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea.’”

With his response, Jesus changes the question at the heart of this passage. No longer is this a conversation about “How much faith is enough?” Now it’s a conversation about what faith is for. So he tells a parable that baffles, even offends our modern sensibilities ... but that, ultimately, illustrates this point: Faith is for service. Faith is for living a life of obedient service to Jesus the Christ. As disciples, *this* is our duty and our delight — to serve within the household of God by forgiving one another, and feeding one another, and helping one another, and loving one another. Faith is for service to Christ.

That last part is essential: service *to Christ*. Obedience *to Christ*. It may sound obvious, but that is the thing that makes this parable good news, and not a tool of unjust societies to put some people “in their place.”

It is not service to the Earl of Grantham — as generous and kind as he usually is to the servants who live and work at Downton Abbey. It is not obedience to some power-hungry master, who trades in cruelty and terror to keep laborers in line. Faith is lived out in service to a Lord who models service himself — a Lord who prepares a feast and sets a table, and invites us to sit down and dine.

¹ Kim Long, *Feasting on the Word*, 142.

We cannot overlook that today's passage from Luke falls exactly between two other stories in which a table has central place. Five chapters earlier, Jesus tells a parable in which he compares the Messiah to a master who returns from a wedding banquet. Upon finding that the servants have waited up to welcome him home, the head of the household invites them to sit down at the table. And then he — the master himself — serves them something to eat (Luke 12:35-38). And five chapters later is the story we recall every time we gather at this table — the story of Jesus breaking bread with his disciples for the last time. It was during that meal that Jesus said to them, "Who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? ... I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

This is what faith is for: Faith is for service to the One who serves. Faith is for living a life of obedience to the One who sat at table with religious leaders and sinners, with tax collectors and famished crowds. And, at these tables, the divisions between rich and poor, between righteous and unrighteous began to dissolve as unlikely companions took their place at Christ's table.

When we put our own faith into practice, when we commit our lives to serving the One who serves, we find that our own tables start to look a bit different as well. There are some places where this transformation is abundantly clear:

Broad Street Ministry is located in an old Presbyterian church in the heart of Philadelphia. It's a little hard to describe what this ministry is: It's not a church ... well, not in a traditional sense. But there is a worshipping community that gathers weekly in the Sanctuary. And it's not a social services agency, though they provide everything from a clothing closet to a wellness clinic to their own mail service, which allows over 3,000 Philadelphians with no permanent address to receive their mail. I guess you could call Broad Street Ministry a glimpse of God's kingdom. It's a place where people from all walks of life come together because of a shared belief in radical hospitality — a belief that "there is always a seat at [the] table; [that] there is enough for everyone."²

Broad Street's faith community gathers for worship every Sunday afternoon. And, let me tell you, it's a gathering the likes of which you will *not* find anywhere else in Philadelphia. On any given Sunday, there are business leaders from the city, and young adults looking for a point of connection, and Presbyterians from partnering churches, and people experiencing homelessness — many of whom gather in Broad Street's Sanctuary three or four or five times a week to partake of a freshly prepared meal.

When the time comes to celebrate communion, the whole congregation streams to the table: young and old, rich and poor, people of different races and nationalities, those who have too much and those who have too little. They come to the table as servants of the One who serves, and they break bread together. They come to the table, because they know everyone has an honored place.

The scene is a far cry from the tables of Downton Abbey, where distinctions between served and servant are preserved at all costs. Or from the tables where menu prices convey that some are welcome, and some not. Or — let's face it — from most of the tables where we find ourselves eating with others who are just like us. Because, at the table of our Lord, divisions dissolve and hierarchies crumble. At the table of our Lord, we all have a place — servants of the One who serves, made one family in Christ.

Jesus asks his disciples: "Will [the master] say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat?'" And the answer is: Yes. Of course, he will. Because that's exactly what happens at this table.

² <https://www.broadstreetministry.org/our-mission/>

World Communion Prayer 2019 ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Creator of the cosmos, we come to this table to celebrate the meal Jesus consecrated 2,000 years ago when he gathered with his 12 disciples in a house in Jerusalem. We give thanks for the ties that bind us together in our church family as brothers and sisters who truly care for one another.

We are grateful for times
to pray and sing and ponder your word together,
to learn and laugh together,
to hold each other up when storms threaten,
to lock arms when we battle demons determined to shred the fabric of our communities,
and to join together in taking your love out to a world in pain.

Loving God, living in an age when many seek to accentuate differences and to create friction between people by slicing the world up according to human created categories, we recall the words of Scripture that each person is created in your image.

Remind us that differences can divide us, but differences can also enrich our lives. Differences can prompt suspicion, but differences can also add zest. Differences can narrow our field of vision, but differences can also expand our horizon.

Gracious God, on this special day when Christians around the globe celebrate this sacrament, we express our gratitude for all people of the planet who drive darkness away with light, who pry open the floodgates of justice, and who are driven by your vision of a day when we will be able to pound assault weapons into farming tools.

Everlasting God, as we break bread with one another – a variety of breads that reminds us of different cultures, colors, and customs – remind us that we are one human family, and that you call us to strive for the values that generate opportunities for all to thrive, and the ideals that enhance the common good.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.