

**“The Servants’ Servant”**  
**Luke 17:5-10**

There’s much not to like in this passage. **“Lord, increase our faith,”** seems to be not only an innocent request, but also a noble one. Who wouldn’t want to have more faith? But Jesus is very abrupt in his response. “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed – you could work wonders!”

The disciples want to super-size their faith, but Jesus says you only need a seed-sized faith. Jesus seems to suggest that his disciples didn’t have much if any faith. If they really want to have faith, be faithful first and the faith, the trust, will follow. “So quit whining and get to work.” Why this kind of response? To remind his disciples and us, **“That the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves...”**<sup>i</sup>

“Why do I have to do that?” asked the little girl. “Why do I have to do this?” asked the little boy. Answer: “Because I said so. Remember, I’m the parent and you’re the child.” Such thoughts shouldn’t surprise us. The Bible is full of texts admonishing us to obey and serve because God said so and God is God and we are not!

**“The Lord your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast.”**<sup>ii</sup>

**“Only fear the Lord, and serve him faithfully with all your heart; for consider what great things he has done for you.”**<sup>iii</sup>

**“Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling,”** sang the Psalmist.<sup>iv</sup>

As soon as Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law of a fever we read, **“Immediately she got up and began to serve them.”**<sup>v</sup> Wow! No time for convalescence. She must have belonged to an HMO!

Jesus resisted temptation by quoting the scripture - **Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.**<sup>vi</sup>

We’ve heard all that many times before. We can accept our role as servants of God. This parable, however, is particularly oppressive. “Do what I tell you and don’t expect me to fall all over you for doing it. If you work all day in the field, don’t expect me to serve you supper at the end of the day. No, clean up, change your clothes and serve me supper! Remember, you are slaves and *worthless* ones at that.” If the adjective *worthless* wounds your self-esteem, the King James Version translates **“unprofitable servants”** as if Jesus’ disciples were commodities traded on the stock exchange.

We should never forget that God is God and we are only God's servants. That's only part of the story. Remember how our faith story begins? We were created in the image of God, we were not created to be robotic servants.

No one better captures the intimacy of what it means to be created in God's image than the late African-American poet, James Weldon Johnson, in a series of sermons called *God's Trombones*. "

And God stepped out on space,  
And he looked around and said:  
I'm lonely –  
I'll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see  
Darkness covered everything,  
Blacker than a hundred midnights  
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,  
And the light broke,  
And the darkness rolled up on one side,  
And the light stood shining on the other,  
And God said: That's good!

Then God walked around,  
And God looked around  
On all that he had made.  
He looked at his sun,  
And he looked at his moon,  
And he looked at his little stars;  
He looked on his world  
With all its living things,  
And God said; I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down –  
On the side of a hill where he could think;  
By a deep, wide river he sat down;  
With his head in his hands,  
God thought and thought,  
Till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river  
God scooped the clay;  
And by the bank of the river  
He kneeled him down;  
And there the great God Almighty  
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,

Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,  
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;  
This Great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeled down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,  
And man became a living soul.  
Amen. Amen.<sup>vii</sup>

God was lonely and wanted someone to love. Sounds absurd, doesn't it, that the Creator of the universe could ever be lonely? It's absurd only because more of our concepts of God are drawn more from philosophy than they are from the Bible. Remember, **"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for man."**<sup>viii</sup> That's just as absurd a thought. Luke includes in his Gospel an unfamiliar beatitude of Jesus that sounds just as absurd: **"Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them."**<sup>ix</sup>

As oppressive as today's parable seems to be, it won't throw us off balance if we can remember not only that we are to serve God, but also that the Son of Man came to serve us! A rabbi once observed that a person should carry in a pocket two stones, one inscribed with *"For my said the world was created"* and with the other, *"I am but dust and ashes."* And each stone should be pulled out, as the occasion requires, to remind us of who we are in God's creation.

I cannot read the parable we have before us without remembering the story we hear on Maundy Thursday when Jesus shares a meal with his disciples in the Upper Room. It suggests something totally different. Since the disciples were all so into themselves that everyone neglected an important sign of hospitality, Jesus got up from the table, took a towel and began to wash the disciples' feet. Peter protested when Jesus tried to wash his feet. "Oh, no, Lord, it's my job to wash your feet." **Jesus said, "If I don't wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing."**<sup>x</sup>

Many years ago, when our children were still children, we were invited for dinner at the home of a Korean family who were members of our church. There were five of them and four of us but only eight places at the table. It didn't take long for us to discover that Sung Choi had no intention of sitting at the table with us. She would serve us and while we were eating, she'd retreat to the kitchen. We were uncomfortable and we protested. "Sung, please sit down and enjoy this meal with us." Not only did we not understand her culture, we misunderstood the point – this was her way of extending hospitality to us. Our role that evening was to receive it.

Yes, we are to obey God and to serve God but first we must allow God to serve us. I realize that

such a thought is counter intuitive but the word *Maundy* comes from the same root as *mandate* and refers to a commandment, specifically – **“I give you a new commandment,”** said Jesus, **“that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**<sup>xi</sup> *Just as I have loved you* – we cannot love unless we first receive his love for us; we cannot serve unless we first allow him to serve us.

Someone has written, "You have no duties to God, but you have the duty to yourselves to let God serve you and feed you so well that you become capable of sharing your bread as joyfully as he has shared his with you."<sup>xii</sup> Just look at the way he shares his bread, his very self, with us. Let us come. He is the host. He is among us as one who serves. By his grace, we are fed. By his grace, we will live in freedom and in joy as we give ourselves to one another and to the world which he loves so much.

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- i. Psalm 100:3 (KJV)
  - ii. Deuteronomy 13:4
  - iii. 1 Samuel 12:24
  - iv. Psalm 2:11
  - v. Luke 4:39
  - vi. Matthew 4:10
  - vii. *God's Trombones*, (The Viking Press, 1927; Penguin Books edition, p. 17-20).
  - viii. Mark 10:45
  - ix. Luke 12:37
  - x. John 13:8 (*The Message*)
  - xi. John 13:35
  - xii. Father Louis Evely, actual reference unknown