

27th Sunday, Year C, October 7, 2007

Readings: Hab. 1:2-2; 2:2-4; Ps. 95; 2 Tim. 1:6-8; 13-14; Lk. 17:5-10

Unprofitable servants/grateful friends.

The parables Jesus often present an inspiring story that calls us to take dramatic steps in our lives. Last week, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus called us to pay attention to the needs of the poor and to take action to help them. In the gospel today Jesus tells his disciples a parable of a different sort. It is often called the parable of the “unprofitable servants” and it is quite disconcerting. A servant comes in from a long day of manual labor, and the master demands: “Prepare something for me to eat! You can eat when I am finished.” And then Jesus applies this to his disciples. After you have served your master just say to your selves: “We are unprofitable servants. We have done no more than our duty.”

This doesn't sound like a story about a gracious, loving God. It sounds more like an authoritarian ruler who just wants to keep his followers in line. Is God really like a tough master who likes to lay down the law for his servants? If so, most of us would prefer to have as little as possible to do with a god like this.

So what are we to make of the parable? To understand it we need to remember another passage in Luke where Jesus seems to say the exact opposite of what he does in today's gospel. It is in Luke's account of the supper on the night before Jesus is tried and executed. Jesus, the master, has just served his disciples dinner, giving them bread and wine, blessing it and telling them: "This is my body,

given for you. This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

How do the disciples respond to their master serving them like this? They argue with one another about who is the greatest! And here is Jesus' response:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them . . . but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant. For who is greater: the one seated at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one seated at table? [But] I am among you as the one who serves."

What is going on here? In today's gospel Jesus seems to say that his followers should be like servants that wait on their master at table even though they have just come in from a long day's work in the fields. At the Last Supper he says the opposite: Jesus the master or leader serves his disciples at table.

Let me suggest a way we can understand all how these two teachings don't simply contradict each other. In the Last Supper account in John's gospel, after serving his followers by washing their feet, Jesus says to them "I no longer call you servants, but friends." Here Jesus breaks through the expected relation of teacher and disciple, replacing the model of master and servant with that of the relation between friends. He tells his followers that just as one friend seeks the good of the other friend, he is totally dedicated to their good. He is with them not as their

master but, in effect, as their servant. Serving them at table and washing their feet is a sign of his love and friendship for them.

In that context, today's gospel takes on new light. Students who have been served by a teacher in ways that enable them grow in understanding and even wisdom can only be filled with deep gratitude. In the same way, Jesus disciples have been served by him by showing them God's unconditional love for them and making that love visible in their lives. Gratitude should be their response. And they should treat each other with gratitude too. They should humbly serve one another, rather than arguing about which of them is the greatest.

When Jesus disciples do serve each other this way, they are only doing their duty, like the servants we heard about in today's gospel. That means us! As people who have been unconditionally loved by God we are called to respond to God with deep gratitude. We are called to live out that gratitude in action, returning love and friendship to God by active love and friendship toward each other. When we do that, we are only doing our duty. So in light of Jesus' full teachings, perhaps we could rename the parable of the unprofitable servants into the parable of the grateful friends. We are invited to be disciples who live lives of humble service to each other because our God loves us so humbly and is among us as one who serves.