

“Much Obligated”  
Luke 17:5-10

First Presbyterian Church, Martinsville

Have you ever felt like the disciples in this story? In the midst of a tough time, or when you feel uncertain about the future, or even at the end of a long week, do you want to simply sigh and cry out, “Increase my faith?”

We don’t know why the disciples asked this of Jesus, but if we think back to our previous Sunday readings maybe it was the story of the rich man and Lazarus, or Jesus’ teachings on serving God rather than wealth or maybe it is his teaching in the verses just preceding our reading in Luke about forgiving the same person, seven times...a day! Perhaps the disciples thought to themselves, “Gosh, this is what I have to do? This is hard work! I’m gonna need a lot more *faith* to do this!”

To the disciples’s request, Jesus replies with two little stories, which don’t seem to fit together at first glance, one about a mustard seed, and another about a master and a slave. I think I hear Jesus saying to them, “Listen, I have some good news...and some *hard* good news...” The good news is that with even the faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, you can do amazing things! And then the hard good news, he tells the story of the master and slave.

This is an uncomfortable story to hear because it uses the example and imagery of slavery, and it is loaded with negative connotations for us. But Jesus does not use this illustration to validate slavery, in fact the master/slave relationship in the first century as historians tells was worlds apart, very different, from the way slavery was practiced in the United States. He instead uses the example and appeals to a common practice his listeners would have known very well in the world they lived in. But he uses the story in a shocking and surprising way. Because he’s challenging us to re-examine our relationship to God. He starts out by asking, “which of you having a slave...” but then the story and the tables turn on us, because at the end it is we who are the slaves. We are challenged to see our relationship with God as servants and slaves, in a place of humility. It is a story that illustrates a way of life that doesn’t expect rewards or special treatment for doing what is right.

It may seem to be a harsh and unfeeling illustration – a master that doesn't even *thank* the servant for his service? But the point in this story is not that we learn to be gracious masters, but faithful and humble slaves. To do what is commanded of us by God. To do what we “ought to do,” or another way to translate it, to do what we are “obligated to do.”

Obligation is not a popular word in today's culture. In a society that values individual expression and freedom, it seems to run counter to those things which encourage creativity and free expression. We don't want to *have* to do something, just for the sake of the task. We don't want to be bound to do something, when we'd rather be doing something we like. But I also hear there are still voices that lament the sense of duty that we once valued, the sense that we were bound to do things for our family, our country and our society because they were the right thing to do.

As I reflected on this sense of obligation, my mind floated to Jane Austen, one of my favorite authors, and other literature that uses forms of English long since considered old-fashioned. In one episode of my favorite book, *Pride and Prejudice*, a gentleman thanks his benefactor for providing a part of the settlement of an estate with the words, “Thank you. I am most exceedingly obliged.” I had heard this phrase when I was younger in stories that used old-fashioned language and I thought it was simply a synonym for thank you, that's usually how it functioned. But I only realized later its connection to obligation. Much obliged. The Oxford English Dictionary beautifully defines “obliged” as “to be bound to a person by ties of gratitude.”

This is the sense of obligation that we can celebrate and that we should and must recover and claim, for we are bound to God with ties of gratitude. For God is a gracious God, extending to us good gifts beyond anything we could ever respond or pay back. God in Jesus Christ demonstrated what it was to be a gracious master, to not count the cost and indeed to offer his own life as payment for our own debt of sin. That in Christ Jesus, our indebtedness is erased, by the act of love offered on the cross.

And so as we note, Christ in his life and ministry, is not like the master in this story, sitting first to eat and be served. For Christ came not to be served, but to serve. Christ rather than eating a meal by himself, instead freely invites all people to share his own table. Christ ate with sinners and tax collectors, prostitutes and outcasts of society, shared meals and table fellowship with them. And so as we too are invited to the table, we eat with Christ and we are thereby bound to God and one another in the holy meal.

The meal that we celebrate and share with brothers and sisters around the world this day, also celebrates the ties that bind us together in Christ. We are bound one to another, but we are also bound to a common ministry, to care to do justice, to love and show compassion. Indeed when we come to the table, we are nourished, so that we can *grow* in faith.

Lawrence Cunningham tells a story about a university student who felt his faith slipping away, felt like he was losing his faith, and so he came to the well-known theologian Karl Rahner for some advice. He asked if there was something he could do, something he could read and learn so that he could strengthen his faith, increase his faith. But the theologian told him, “Go and serve the poor, and there your faith will be rekindled.” Faith isn’t just how we feel, or what we think, or the words we use, but its what we do. It’s the way we act out in service to God and one another the ties that bind us together. The faith we share with brothers and sisters in Christ around the world draws us together, to eat, to celebrate, but also to serve and to be in solidarity with all around the world.

And we’re invited to share this meal at this table, not because we deserve it, not because we have super-sized faith or little faith, but because God freely offers us grace in Christ Jesus and extends to us the invitation to come and be nourished, come and be fed, come and serve.

And so to Christ’s gracious invitation, let us say thank you, but also “much obliged.”

Rev. Jennifer McCann Spivey