

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“We Your Servants”**

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*“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Luke 17:7-10).*

Marcus Samuelsson is one of the most decorated and notable chefs in the world. In his autobiography “Yes, Chef”, Samuelsson speaks of the hierarchy in professional European kitchens. At the top is the Executive Chef. Then under him (or her) is the Sous Chef, then the Line Cooks, the Pastry Chef, all the way down to the choppers and moppers and dish washers. Whatever your status, you must know where you’re at in the pecking order. It’s almost like the military. When a chef above you tells you to do something, you say “Yes, Chef”. If you do it well, don’t expect any thank-yous or recognition. If you do it poorly . . . verbal abuse is an unfortunate part of the kitchen culture in many top restaurants.

Samuelsson said a lot of fine American chefs don’t make it in European kitchens. It isn’t for lack of skills or experience or work ethic. It’s for lack of humility. He’s noticed a lot of Americans want to be seen and heard and recognized. They want to stand out and want their work to be appreciated. Wanting to be noticed, they try to make small talk with the head chef, which is like a private trying to make small talk with a three-star general. Being noticed by the head chef is usually not a good thing. Samuelsson says it’s better just to do your job, keep your head low and try **not** to be noticed (pp.165ff).

The parable in our Gospel lesson shares some of these same dynamics. The situation is that of a small farmer who has one servant or maybe slave. (In the Greek it’s the same word for both; I’m going with slave.) This slave does double duty, in the field and in the house. Plowing a field with oxen was hard, tiring work. At the end of the day he just wants to wash up and eat dinner. But is this how slaves were treated in the first century? Does the master say, “Here, you’ve worked hard! Have a seat at the table and let me serve you now.” Of course not! The master would say, ‘Now prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink.’”

Hard service is expected of a slave. He knows he is owned lock, stock and barrel. He can expect no thanks or recognition. He just wants to get through the day and have a meal at the end. He wants to do what’s necessary, keep his head low and try not to be noticed. Then Jesus says to his followers (that’s us): “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

You see what Jesus is doing here? He’s establishing a culture of humility in His church, where we, His servants, serve Him (and others) without looking for thanks or recognition or praise. Jesus wants us to serve, keep our heads low, and try not to be noticed.

It’s odd that this text was appointed for this day, also known here as Pastor Appreciation Day. It’s not necessary, you know. As pastors we are just unworthy servants. What makes us unworthy? Same stuff that makes you unworthy: sin, rebellion, laziness. However well we do it, it could always be done better, should be done better.

At the end of the day, Jesus gives us the words to use: “We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.” Whatever your role is in the kingdom of God, don’t ever do it for recognition. Remember what Jesus said? “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them. . . . When you give to the poor sound no trumpet that you may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, you have received your reward. But when you give do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Mt. 6:1ff). When you give of your time, talents or treasures keep your head low and try not to be noticed.

In the parable, the daily work of a slave does not bring any special rewards. He is entitled to nothing, not even a simple “thank you”.

In a way, we too are like slaves. Our Lord owns us lock, stock and barrel. He created us. We are His. He redeemed us. He bought us back. He paid the price with His blood. We belong to Him. He says it in so many ways. My people. My sheep. My children. My friends. My redeemed. Clearly, He owns us and He knows it. He does not carry on, however, like the master in this parable. To the contrary, our Lord is kind and generous. Our Master **does** invite us to rest and recline at the table. He doesn't want us to be the brick making slaves of ancient Egypt. "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest" (Ex. 23:12). To the crowd, Jesus said "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest . . . you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt. 11:29ff)

To His apostles He said, "Come away with me to a quiet place and let us rest." (Mk. 6:30-31). "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10). Even as we disengage the wheels and rest, He'll take care of us. He'll feed and defend us. Though our Lord and Master, He will even serve us! Remember how He dressed Himself for service, with a towel around his waist, and then he got on his hands and knees and washed the feet of His own servants.

Our Lord generously rewards even those who haven't done much, who haven't pulled their weight. Remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard, where those who started working at the tail-end of the day still received a full day's payment? Of course, those who were working since early morning didn't think it was fair, but their argument is with grace. This master wants to lavish his generosity on those who don't earn it.

Markus Samuelson says "keep your heads low and try not to be noticed." But our Lord does notice. Matthew 25, "I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me" (vv. 35-45). And from the same chapter, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master's happiness!"

Our Master is not one who will work us into the ground. No, He is the one who did the hard and dirty work Himself. It was too heavy for us. None of us could have carried the cross He carried for us. That battle was not ours but His alone. In fact, to save their own skins, His servants fled. But He stayed the course and suffered the wrath for us and for our salvation.

Afterwards He finds His servants in the upper room, and initially they are terrified because they know they have it coming to them. But what does He give them instead? "Peace be with you" He says.

Days later they are fishing. All night with nothing to show for it. It's hard work, pulling in those heavy, water-soaked nets weighed down with stones, casting them out again and again and dragging them back into the boat. Hard work made harder by the futility.

But then Jesus calls out to them from the shoreline and tells them where to cast their nets, and 153 big fish all but swim into the nets. They know it's their Master, the One who owns them. He has prepared a fire of burning coals with fish already on it, along with some bread. "Come have breakfast", He says to them, and **He** serves **them**. "Jesus took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish", an elegant way to say He still loves and forgives them.

He does the same for us right here. He has prepared this meal for us. He has paid the cost of it. And with this meal He feeds us with His love and forgiveness.

It changes how we serve Him and others, moving from fear and begrudging obligation, to delight and gratitude. Paul wrote, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17).

One last thing. In the parable, after the slave has come in from a long day of plowing, the master says, "Prepare my supper, dress properly, serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink." He tells the servant to press on with His service. But it will not last forever. There will be rest and refreshment. "Afterward, you will eat and drink."

Our work, our service will not go on forever. There's a feast being prepared for us, "a feast of rich things" Isaiah says, "the best of meats and the finest of wines" (Is. 25:6), far superior than any European culinary autocrat could ever put out. The Lord Himself will prepare this feast for us, and for all the saints somehow gathered around.

Dear friends, now is the time to serve Him joyously, vigorously, gratefully . . . without trolling for recognition or praise. Later, afterward, soon there will be rest and refreshment. We will eat and drink at His table. Amen.