

An Upside Down Life
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 4, 2022-AM Service
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Luke 12:32-40

Sisters and brothers loved by Jesus Christ, it was 1992 and I was walking through the streets of the city where we lived carrying a short connecting line from my bathroom sink. I decided to go ahead and find a new water line myself rather than try to explain it all to my new landlord because doing it myself provided the perfect opportunity to explore my new neighborhood. It didn't take too long before I saw what I was looking for, a hardware store with waterlines that looked just like the one I was carrying in my hand displayed in the window. So far, so good. But here's where the story becomes a bit complicated. You see this new apartment was in Istanbul, Turkey and Lisa and I hadn't even begun language school, and had a total of 6 words or phrases that I could use. I stepped into this little plumbing hardware shop and was greeted by the owner. That used up one of my phrases. I held out my hose and used the second of the half dozen Turkish phrases that I had learned, "Got this!" He examined the line and said he didn't have one. So I asked "Where?" And with that I had burned through half of my vocabulary. At that point he began speaking in complete sentences and pointing until he looked at my face and realized that I was completely lost. At that point he called an errand runner, gave him my water line and sent him off to find a replacement. To me he motioned to have a seat to wait. And then he spoke into an intercom and the next thing I knew a young man appeared with two steaming glasses of Turkish tea balanced on a silver tray. It was heavenly to sip tea and learn some vocabulary for hardware. Before the tea was finished the errand runner was back with the hose that I needed. I finished my tea, paid for my hose, and returned home to fix the sink.

It was a new experience for me to be served tea at the hardware store. But that offer of tea was not new for the store owner. He was following the habits of hospitality that are part of Turkish culture. In that cultural context business is conducted with glasses of tea. In Turkey when you are a guest at someone's home your plate will be filled without asking and the only way to make it stop is to leave some leftovers on your plate. These habits, these practice have grown out of an approach to hospitality that Turks explained to me later as, "The host treats their guest like royalty."

The hospitality practiced in Turkey, and throughout the Middle East, retains some similarities to the way hospitality was practiced in the Bible. In Genesis 18 for example Abraham treats the three visitor like royalty by killing a young calf and baking fresh bread and setting out cheese and milk. Guests were treated like royalty.

Jesus parable that has been dubbed "The Serving Master" is told where the conventions of hospitality called upon the host to serve their guests as if they were royalty.

This parable unfolds in 3 segments. The first segment is verse 35. Jesus places his listeners in the parable with two short commands. The first command is, "Be dressed and ready for service." (v35) The way to be dressed for service in the first century is to hike up their long robe and put a belt around their waist when it was time to work.

The second command “keep your lamps burning” indicates that the parable takes place at night. And there is more. Kenneth Bailey is a Bible scholar who has done a deep dive into Middle Eastern cultural references in Jesus’ parables, points out that there was a pecking order among servants in a first century household. There were servants and then there were the servants to the servants – slaves. Slaves did the dirty jobs – and staying up through the night after working all day long is a dirty job. Jesus is telling this parable to people who’ve served all day... and now must light a lamp so they can serve through the darkness.

Do you know what it’s like to be tired out and still waiting in the darkness with only a small light burning? I wonder if you know what it is like to have your life turned upside down by service or suffering and the nighttime stretches out before you.

I think of people who serve behind the scenes. Sunday school teachers who may be tired out from year after year of service, nursery attendants and children’s worship leaders who get overlooked.

I think of Kid’s Hope mentors serving students whose lives are overturned by poverty and violence.

Pastors, elders and deacons who’ve been trying to nurture connections when forces like pandemic and partisan politics are pulling people apart.

Wives and husbands whose marriages are scotch-taped together with grit and prayer.

A single parent working for \$15 and you learn that your rent and daycare is being increased next month.

A cancer patient waiting for a pathology report after a long regiment of chemo and radiation.

This is a parable for those whose lives are turned upside down. It is for people who are anxious, afraid, tired out with serving in the darkness. It’s for Christians tired and afraid that there is little evidence that their service is bearing fruit in the Kingdom of God.

We are all waiting for the master to show up.

The second segment of the parable is verse 36 and in it Jesus introduces us to the master and reveals three important details.

First, the Master is attending a wedding banquet. That’s pretty straightforward.

Second, the Master is hosting the banquet in his own house. Kenneth Bailey suggests that this “knock” on the door tells Jesus’ audience that the master is not at the outside gate. In the previous chapter when a friend comes to the home of another friend at midnight he must shout at the gate. A shout wakes up sleeping people and assures them you are a friend, because they recognize your voice. Here in chapter 12 where the master is NOT shouting at the gate but rapping on the door, tells us that the master is already inside of the house. It could be that he is hosting the wedding banquet himself.

Third, the master leaves while the banquet is underway. Our translation states that the master “returns” from the banquet. We might assume the master has “returned” because the banquet has ended. In that case his return is expected. The slaves aren’t surprised. Jesus listeners are yawning – there’s nothing to see here.

But, as I was studying this passage I learned there is something to see here. The verb translated “return” also mean “to unloose, to depart, to leave.” The master initiates his leaving. The master

unties himself from being the host of a wedding banquet. In a culture that obligates a host to treat guests like royalty this host treats his guests dismissively – like they are not worthy of his time or attention. By leaving the banquet he abandons his guests.

Jesus forces his listeners to ask “Why?” Why is the master and host leaving the banquet early? Why would a host leave his guests? The answer is found in the third stanza of the parable.

In the third stanza verses 37-38 Jesus bring both the servants and the master into the same frame. Remember these servants are weary. They have been working all day to prepare for the banquet – scrubbing floors, mending table clothes, threshing grain and baking bread, gathering herbs and soaking chickpeas, milking cows, churning butter, prepping the olive oil and wine, slaughtering goats and oxen, chopping wood for the fire. And now, exhausted with lighted lamps they hear a knock at the door. But the banquet isn’t over – they can hear revelry echoing in the corridor. It’s probably the steward demanding more wine. But when they open the door there stands their master. He enters quickly and as he closes the latch he commands the slaves to be seated along the wall, to recline on the cushions around the small table. He scurries off to his walk-in-closet and according to the passage he returns with his ornamental robe tucked into a belt that he has strapped to his waist. The master is dressed to serve. The master has become the servant... rather the slave. Astonished the servants watch as the master unpacks a feast that he obviously confiscated from the banquet. He prepares a table for them – roasted goat and bitter herbs, humus with eggplant, lentil soup with yogurt, of course bread and wine. The master becomes the servant and serves the slaves.

I tried to think of an example of the powerful serving the weak, but I couldn’t find one. I thought of celebrities serving food at homeless shelters or a President distributing supplies after a natural disaster – but that’s not even close. Celebrities arrive with a trail of cameras and reporters to capture their service. In the parable the Master abandons his guests to serves his own slaves like royalty. The master turns hospitality upside down.

Jesus provokes his listeners to ask “why” a master would break conventions of hospitality by extricating himself from a banquet. And the answer he gives is astonishing. Why does the master leave? The answer – to become a servant who serves his slaves like royalty. This is a parable of an upside down life.

Friends, when we view this parable through the lens of Jesus’s ministry we might recognize that Jesus lived an upside down life. By his incarnation he came not to be served but to serve. By his sacrificial love he laid down his life and forgave his enemies. By his resurrection he transformed the first to be last and for the last, least, the lost... to be first in the Kingdom of God.

And if today you come with hearts full of gratitude because your life is right side up then this parable reminds us of the source of grace. If you come today and are weary and burdened... then I have good news because this Master takes off his robe and transfers all of his glory to slave towel that he wrapped around his waist. He provides a meal that will sustain his servants through the long night of service... of suffering. With his body he feeds us and through his blood he restores us. This is a mystery of our faith – not that we are rescued out from our service or suffering. The mystery is that Jesus enters into our service and suffering and it is transformed by his glory.

Many of you know that this is my last sermon as your pastor. Many of you have written, called, and spoken to me about your happiness for this new chapter for me and your sadness that we are leaving. For what it's worth, that is exactly how I feel – both happy and sad.

One of the common themes that is contained in your notes is how much you've appreciated pastoral prayers based on the psalms. The reason that I'm drawn to the psalms is because many of these prayers are prayed by people whose lives have been turned upside down. For 19 years I've been learning to pray these prayers with our neighbors in Heartside whose lives are upside down because of mental illness, immigration, racism, poverty, addiction and homelessness. With deep faith we've prayed "How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?" and "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The other mystery in the parable is how can we be prepared for the coming of our master. This parable calls us to participate with Jesus by practicing hospitality for people whose lives are upside down. By serving others as if they were royalty we participate in Jesus' ongoing work and mysteriously we are transformed into his loving likeness. This is a mystery of our faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Mike Hoogeboom