

Slaves and the Master

Matthew 15:21-28

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2017

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

I recently watched the movie, *Twelve Years a Slave*. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the film it is based upon a book written by Solomon Northrup in the 1800s prior to the Civil War. It is his personal account of his experience of slavery in the American South prior to the Civil War. He was a free black man in upstate New York. Some men hired him to do a job, drugged him, and kidnapped him. They ferried him to the south where they sold him into slavery.

He was included among other black slaves on the plantations of the south. He was subject to everything that they were subject to. The difference is that when he regained his freedom, he was able to write about it. He preserves for us a record of the black experience under slavery in the south.

It is a hard film to watch. It seemed evil for me to sit on my couch with a glass of wine and watch the film. It seemed wrong for FXM to put commercials in it. The black people were subject to the whims of the master. If the master wanted you to work the fields, you worked the fields. If the master wanted you to build a building, you built a building. If the master wanted to use you sexually, he used you sexually. If the master wanted to beat you, the master beat you. It did not even matter whether or not the master thought he had cause in beating you. If he felt like beating you, he beat you.

Impressing the master with your labor did not do any good. Northrup recounts impressing one of his southern masters with his abilities. By doing so he showed up the ignorance of one of the white foremen on the plantation. The white foreman got his revenge by attempting to lynch him. It was only the benevolence of the master that saved him. And even with a benevolent master it seemed like Northrup hung for a long time on that rope with his feet just barely touching the ground enough to keep his head up sufficient such that he did not hang to death.

Occasionally, Northrup had a master that was kind. On one occasion Northrup's master ordered him to play the fiddle, which is how he made a living before he was kidnapped, at a wedding party of a friend of the master's. The master told Northrup that any money that he earned was his to keep. Ordinarily when slaves who were owned by one plantation master worked for another plantation master the master who received the extra help paid the plantation owner who owned the slaves for the labor of the slaves. Here was a master giving Northrup an opportunity to keep what he earned. Otherwise the master would have kept it.

For the most part Northrup worked for a man who was a drunkard and a coward. Hungry for power over other human beings in order to make himself feel a little better, Northrup's master was cruel. He was cruel to the point that he forced Northrup to beat another slave with a whip until her flesh was opened and bleeding.

I do not recount this in order to consider whether or not American slavery was good. I definitely do not recount it in order to comment on recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia. I recount this so that you understand how you stand in front of God.

It is unfortunate that so often our American translations render the Greek word for slave as servant. It is easy for us to accept that we are servants of God. A servant implies payment. A servant implies some understanding between the master and the servant wherein the servant has certain rights in the face of the master among them an income. When we read the translation "servant" we fill in the blank with notions of fair play as if we have rights in front of God. We think that God is obligated to us if we

are His servants. The translation is unfortunate. We are slaves before God. He is our master. He may do with us as He pleases.

He may do with us as He pleases because He made us. We are His creation. We would not exist at all if it were not for His creative activity. If you are a person who enjoys existence, then it is an act of grace and mercy that God has made you. He was under no compulsion to make you. He was under no threat to make you. He made you as a free act of His creative genius. He made you unique. Even if you have an identical twin, you are still unique. The two of you do not have identical experiences. No two people do.

Think of the experiences that you have had. Think of the positive things that have happened in your life. Think how you are blessed beyond other people in the world. If you do not believe that, become a chaperone on one of the youth's mission trips and see how blessed you are compared to the rest of the world. You may complain about the United States, but you are better off than the rest of the world.

God was and is under no obligation to give you any of it. On our last youth mission trip one of the adult chaperones began to talk about it out loud. How was my soul placed into a body born of hard working German ancestry living in the United States and accumulated such wealth? I could have been born here with no opportunity for education destined to work for the land owners who will pay whatever wage they see fit.

Furthermore the blessings of your education and the circumstances of your life are a blessing from God. Think of the circumstances that gave you your wife or husband. Think of the circumstances that brought about your children. Think of the circumstances that brought you the vocation that you possess.

There is something in the heart of each sinful human being and particularly in the heart of Americans that believes that God must deal with us fairly. When God takes something away that we want or need we become angry. We are angry with God because we believe that we had a right to it and that He is not right in taking it away. The reason that God takes it away is to remind you of your status in front of Him. You are a slave. Any blessing that You have is totally at the Master's benevolence.

You are a slave because that is the standing of sinners before God. If we had some righteousness of our own we might have something to negotiate with. But we don't have any righteousness of our own. Maybe if we could see the filthy rags of our righteousness we would know a little better. But we cannot see them. All we can see are the nice clothes that we chose to wear to church this morning, taking them for granted as if God had to put them in our closet. I think that is why God sends or allows bad things to happen to us so that we rejoice when something goes right. He is reminding us of our standing before Him. We have no rights in front of Him. We forfeited those long ago in the garden. We have no life before the master. Whatever life that we have is the life that He decides to give to us.

If you are going to protest your rights before Him, in order to obtain anything from Him, then you are a brood of vipers and He will cast you into the eternal flame. That is what the Pharisees and the Sadducees did. They protested before God's call to repentance. They protested at the preaching of John the Baptist. They protested and refused to be baptized by him. They refused to be baptized by him because they thought that they had rights before God. They knew that they were the descendents of Abraham and they thought that by virtue of their birth they were better than the Gentiles. They thought that by being descendents of Abraham that they had rights before the Almighty that other peoples did not have.

John told them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come! Bear fruit in keeping with repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell

you God can raise up children for Abraham out of these stones.” They did not realize that God’s election of Abraham and his descendents was an act of mercy on God’s part. He did not have to do it. He chose to do it. And Abraham and his descendents were blessed because of His choice.

And the woman in the account understands all of this. She knows that she is not a descendent of Abraham. She knows that Jesus is the Son of David. She knows that He is a proper descendent of Abraham and heir to the throne of Israel. She knows that Jesus is therefore the proper king of Israel. She somehow knows that the king of Israel heals. She knows that He will heal because He is the king and that is how the king is identified. God must have brought His word of the Old Testament to her in order for to understand all of this. I don’t know how she did, but understand she did.

She also knows that she is a Gentile. She knows that she is a Canaanite. She is descended from those who were the enemies of Israel. She is descended from those whose sins had filled up so much that God had decreed the extermination of her people when Israel entered the land. She is descended from those people upon whom Noah pronounced a curse and the descendents of Canaan have lived under that curse of God ever since.

She knows that she is unclean. If she has knowledge of the Old Testament she knows that she is unclean. She knows that God’s holiness resided in the Holy of Holies in the temple. She knew that outside of that was the Holy Place and outside of that was the courtyard where Israel offered her sacrifices and her prayers. She knew that outside of that was the court of the Gentiles where not even she could go because she was a woman. She knew that there was a court of the women outside of that, but she dare not go there because she was a Canaanite. She knew that she had no access to the presence of God because God had chosen to dwell among Israel and had put His dwelling place in Jerusalem.

If she understood all of this she knew that she lived among the unclean Gentiles. She knew that she lived in the place furthest away from God’s presence on earth and because she lived in God’s place furthest away from His presence on earth, she lived in the place closest to the dead.

You remember the animals that God declared unclean in the Old Testament. All of those animals had to do with the dead. They were all animals that fed off of carcasses. God declared them unclean because His holiness will not tolerate the presence of the dead or of those associated with the dead. If His presence was going to be in Israel, then Israel had to avoid those animals associated with death. They were unclean for Israel.

And now this poor woman’s daughter is afflicted by a demon. A demon is an unclean spirit. The point of demon possession is to bring about the destruction of the ones that it inhabits. Just ask some pigs into whom Jesus cast some demons. The woman’s child is not a pig, but a girl. She has some of the creative power of the living God left to her to fight Satan’s demon and to stave off death, but her mother knows that she cannot last forever. Unless the holy God who purifies from uncleanness and thereby gives life does something her daughter will die and be lost forever. Something must be done and what does the woman hear about except the Son of David entering into the unclean lands of the Gentiles.

He had purified lepers who were also unclean. He had healed the sick who were also unclean. Leprosy and sickness were things associated with death. To have them in the body was to defile the body. There were sacrifices and ritual purifications that God required of healed people before they were permitted to approach His presence in the temple.

So here is the Son of David whose mission it is to restore life. He is out touching the unclean and making them clean. He is out near Tyre and Sidon. He has entered the unclean lands of the Gentiles. He has entered the place of darkness and death. The only reason that He could possibly be there is if He were there to bring healing and to bring life. And so she runs out to Him to beg for help.

Jesus reminds her of her status before Him. She calls Him Lord. She calls Him the Son of David. He calls her a dog. He reminds her that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He is under no obligation to help her. He is her master. He can do with her what she pleases. He can let her daughter die. He can cast them both into hell. Who is going to tell Him that He has done anything wrong? He is the master. She is the slave. She is the unclean unrighteous slave. She knows that Jesus is her only alternative. So when Jesus puts it to her that she has no rights, she acknowledges that she has no rights and asks for mercy anyway.

That is what is going on when Jesus says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." The children's bread is Himself. The children are the sons of Israel. She and her daughter are the dogs.

She does not protest. She does not call Him unfair. She does not insist upon her rights. If she had she would not have gotten anything from the Lord. She does not call Him a racist. She does not accuse Him of bigotry favoring one people over another like that when a child's life is at stake. She does not call Him mean spirited, allowing little children to die. She does none of that.

She rather appeals to His character, "Yes, Lord." She still called Him Lord even after the insult. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She accepts her position before Him and still asks for mercy. She counts on the kind of Lord that He is.

You have a crucified Lord. He is unlike any other master the world has ever seen. In His household the master dies in order to save the slaves. My recommendation to you unclean Gentiles with death and demons hanging about you, is that you do the same.

He created you. You really have no option but to appeal to His mercy. And He is good and you will find that the crumbs from His table give everlasting life.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.