

## Who Gets a Place at the Table?

It's never easy or pleasant to preach Scriptural references to slavery. The Bible seems to take slavery for granted, an evil so normalized in the ancient world that no one even questions its existence. And Jesus talking so calmly about slavery is particularly distressing. I want him to rail against it, to condemn slavery as an abomination before God. Perhaps you feel the same way.

Jesus doesn't explicitly condemn slavery in today's Gospel passage, but that doesn't mean he's in favor or even indifferent to it. He uses the imaginary slave and master to give his disciples a reference they can understand. In their world, a slave would be expected to toil from dawn until dusk, plowing fields or tending livestock, then wait on his master over supper. The slave could only eat after his master was finished, no matter how exhausted or famished he might be. It's a rank injustice, though not one the disciples would recognize. They see such herculean labors as no more than a slave is expected to do. Jesus is saying that, when God calls the disciples to act, any labor they undertake is also no more than they should do.

Our passage appears in a compilation of Jesus's sayings. Luke places this exchange immediately after Jesus tells the disciples that they had better be prepared to forgive offenders up to seven times in a single day. No wonder they asked Jesus to increase their faith – they probably should have asked him to increase their strength, too. But from Jesus's perspective, the disciples aren't being told to do anything remarkable. There's a hint of self-pity in the disciples' request that Jesus increase their faith – when Jesus uses the loaded phrase “we are worthless slaves,” I think he's calling them out on it. When God gives you a job, you don't whine about it being too hard or continually beg for extra praise. You just step up and get it done.

Jesus's story carries an additional meaning on this, the final Sunday of our Season of Creation. We've spent the last few weeks talking about the beauty of God's Earth and examining

the damage that humankind has inflicted upon it. Today, we're going to talk about who benefits from our misuse of Creation, and who pays the price for it.

Much of the harm that humanity has done to the world has its roots in the Enlightenment. As far back as 1918, German sociologist Max Weber observed that modern glorification of science and reason was “disenchanting” the Earth, erasing the idea that Creation is the sacred handiwork of God. Instead of understanding the world to be magical and holy, people came to see it as a pile of soulless resources that humanity could pillage at will. That supposedly “enlightened” perspective set humanity up for the colonial era and the Industrial Revolution, both born from European covetousness and ambition. In the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia, forests and jungles were ripped down for timber, gems, minerals and oil were gouged from the earth, animals were slaughtered for fur, feathers, meat, and ivory. Most horrifically, the indigenous people, nearly always people of color, were driven from their lands, robbed of their cultures, sold into slavery and, if they resisted, murdered *en masse*. Racism, the cruel and dishonest insistence that white people are somehow superior and entitled, is nothing more or less than an ugly attempt to rationalize the systematic violence and abuse that dominant white culture has inflicted and continues to inflict on people of color around the world.

Colonialism's legacy is racism, ruthless capitalism and environmental degradation. Mass production and toxic capitalism generate mountains of waste that end up in the waters, land and air. Profligate burning of fossil fuels has overheated the planet to the point where glaciers are melting, islands are being submerged and weather is becoming erratic and extreme. In the name of convenience, single use plastics and other trash are crammed into landfills or dumped in the oceans. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is bigger than Alaska – its counterpart in the Atlantic is only about as big as the distance from Cuba to Virginia. But not all of that trash stays in the

ocean. Our own Bishop Sutton has traveled the world in the name of Jesus. He confirms that North American plastics wash up on shorelines all over the Southern Hemisphere. People in the industrialized North live inequitably well, and our brothers and sisters in the South pay the price for our self-indulgence.

All of this can be pretty depressing, but our Christian faith still offers hope. Our LORD is all about reversals – “the first shall be last and the last shall be first,” right? So, while Jesus doesn’t explicitly say that the master should invite the slave to join him at the table, we should at least wonder whether he’s suggesting it. Jesus, the master storyteller, uses parables and metaphors not just to make a point, but to get his listeners to *think*. The master/slave relationship is inherently unjust. Isn’t Jesus calling the disciples, and us, to do something about that?

The answer, I think, can be found in that “faith the size of a mustard seed” thing. Many theologians believe that Jesus is scolding the disciples because their faith is smaller than the tiniest seed farmers plant in the earth. But Bible scholar Fred Craddock argues that we should translate Jesus’s words not as “if you had enough faith, which you don’t,” but as “if you have enough faith, and you do.” Suddenly, the image of a mulberry tree shaking the dirt off its roots and jumping into the sea takes on a whole new meaning. Jesus is telling the disciples that they have enough faith to make seemingly impossible things happen if they’ll just act as their faith instructs them. I believe Jesus is saying the same thing to us.

The problems of environmental degradation and the disproportionate harm it’s causing to people of color around the world can seem overwhelming. But if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, *and we do*, we can do something about it. We in the North can learn to live more simply, and to put racial justice and reconciliation at the center of our work to heal and restore our planet. As individuals, we can contribute our time, talent and treasure to charities that work

for social justice and environmental repair. We can pick up trash in the streets. We can eat seasonally and buy locally. We can grow at least a little of our own food, and stay away from anything processed or overpackaged. We can reuse single use containers. We can buy more thoughtfully, support local businesses and favor merchants who deal in sustainable goods. And we can take the pledge Bishop Sutton asked when he granted me postulancy, to stop drinking water out of single use plastic bottles.

In the broader world, we can press our lawmakers to stop talking about climate change and do something. We can march, protest, petition, and vote. We can demand an economy that's based in sustainability, and not in the myth of infinite growth. We can oppose racism at home and speak out against the exploitation and abuse of the global South. We can insist that our brothers and sisters in Christ deserve a seat at the table and a meaningful voice in international climate talks. The people who suffer most from environmental degradation should be encouraged and supported in demanding change and designing equitable solutions.

We can also remember that the "disenchantment of the world" is a lie. The Earth is still God's masterpiece, still a place of unparalleled beauty and wonder. The magic remains – we've just lost the ability to see it. But if we act on our faith and get our priorities straight – if we focus not on how much we can consume, but how much Jesus calls us to gratefully share – I believe we'll gradually recapture our ability to see the enchantment of the world. There's a place at God's table for all of his children. At the very least, we must invite those who have been excluded to take their seats. Better still, we should put on our aprons, roll up our sleeves and serve those who haven't yet had their share of God's bounty. In the Kingdom of God on this, our fragile and magnificent Earth, the first shall be last, the last shall be first, and that's a very good thing indeed. *Amen.*