

“A Practice Sermon about Stewardship”

Luke 17:5-10

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

World Communion Sunday

6 October 2019

Matt Matthews

“The parable of the worthless servant is probably no one’s favorite.” That’s how one commentator begins his reflection on this passage (R. Alan Culpepper, writing for the New Interpreter’s Bible, p. 323, Vol. IX).

But it is an important parable. Yes, there’s a disconnect whenever we moderns talk about slavery; there was probably a disconnect when the ancients talked about Christianity and slavery. And, no, we don’t like how in this parable God may be at least roughly compared to the slave-driving master; we don’t like that one bit. But this parable is important because it reminds us that to be a disciple of Jesus Christ (or to be a “slave” or “servant” to him and his cause) requires a willingness to live up to our call. And that willingness could be described as our “duty.”

So, the slave works in the field all day and comes back to the house. The owner of the house doesn’t say, “Let me fix you some dinner. You must exhausted.” No, the owner of the house (and the owner of the slave—yikes!), says, “I know you have worked hard out in the field, but now it’s time to get my dinner on the table. And make it snappy!”

No, it’s probably not our favorite parable. There’s no sweetness and light in this text, no warm fuzzies. None of that. It’s a hard text about doing our duty.

There is no intimation in this text that if we live good lives we are going to get a reward because of it. God, the master, owes us nothing for living good, Christian lives. Let me say that again: God owes us nothing for doing good in the world. It’s simply expected. It’s our duty.

(Note: This text, in a backhanded way, underscores how marvelous God’s grace is. God loves and redeems us not because of what we do, but simple because of what God does. This is sheer grace. Doing out duty, doesn’t earn us this grace, which is an altogether free gift.)

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Calvin Vann knows about duty.

As a rookie fireman, he washed, waxed, and polished fire trucks. He risked his life fighting fires. He did what was required, did what he was told, worked hard, followed his calling.

As a fire captain, he made sure trucks were washed, waxed, and polished. He risked his life fighting fires. He did what was required, did what he was told, worked hard, followed his calling.

He was trained well. When he was a kid, on Saturday nights, he was expected to polish his Sunday shoes. And on Sundays he was front and center in the church with his family. He may not have always liked it, but it was his duty.

When Calvin's church was to take a vote about whether or not to host a Vietnamese refugee family in the early 1970s, Calvin rose in opposition to the plan. "Too many of my friends came home in body bags," he said. "I'm against this. If the church does this, I won't work against it, but I won't support it, either."

The church voted to host a Vietnamese refugee family.

Tom Tran got to Portsmouth with his young family. The church set them up. Tom Tran got a job at the Portsmouth fire department as a mechanic. He had been an officer in the South Vietnamese Army, but he knew engines. He set about keeping the fire trucks in working order.

And—you guessed it—he and Calvin became fast friends.

* * *

This story stirred me when Calvin first told me 23-years-ago; it stirred me again when Calvin told me again this week.

And this story reminds me to look more broadly at the world God created and redeemed, and to be in right relationship with all people and cultures, not just my own. This is my calling. It's my duty. And it's yours, too.

On World Communion Sunday today, let us be mindful of this church's relationships with those around the globe. Let us remember . . .

- Bernie and Farsiane Adney-Rissocotta in Indonesia.
- Our partner church in Havana, Cuba, and our friends at the Luyano Presbyterian Church. Let us pray for pastor Daniel Izquierdo, wife Anna, baby-on-the-way, and the whole, dear flock. Let us remember the knitting group, the Tai Chi group, the AA, the water purification ministry, and their profound ministry of hospitality. *(We are convening a study group now that will meet on Monday nights at our house. Some of us will travel there this winter. YOU are invited.)*
- Our friends in Pakistan at the Presbyterian Education Board and the girls' schools were support there. Let us also welcome the 10,000 Villages Rug Sale Event

we are hosting in Westminster Hall in the coming weeks. On story-telling night, we're going to learn about the Pakistani families that make these exquisite rugs.

- Bob and Kristi Rice our mission co-workers in South Sudan. They'll be here soon preaching for us later this month.
- DREAAM—Driven to Reach Excellence and Academic Achievement for Males. This program reaches part of the world in our own town that is often overlooked.
- The work of Rebecca Ginsberg as she's daring us to reach inside of prison bars with God's love through basic education support.
- The Boyds in the Congo will be coming soon to have lunch with us.
- Let us remember the meetings we're convening to discuss ways to broaden our international footprint here at First Pres.

God loves the whole wide world, and it's our privilege and honor to do the same. It's our calling. If we claim it, it can be our great thrill. If we do it well, it may break our hearts and remake our hearts. Living up to the commandment, with even a mustard seed of faith, is our duty.

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After seeing how hard it was for Tom Tran to be away from family, to live through the ache and loss of war; after seeing how hard Tom Tran worked, and how faithful he was to the small Vietnamese Roman Catholic Church that he helped found, Calvin had a change of heart.

Calvin realized his view of being Christ's disciple in the world was much smaller than God's view. Calvin's heart was too small, his skin, perhaps, too white, his views too provincial, his vision too narrow. But, thanks be to God, God changed Calvin Vann through the friendship of Tom Tran. When this happened, the wide world got a little smaller.

And when Calvin apologized to Tom—when he said, "I stood against you and your family coming to this community"—Calvin Vann and Tom Tran, who grew up in different corners of the world, became true brothers in Jesus Christ.

Loving the world like that is our privilege, our honor, our calling, our *duty*.

AMEN.

Gospel Luke 17:5-10

5The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

7"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? 8Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 9Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

