

“Slavery”

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We love underdogs, don't we? If Vatican City had a soccer team and somehow ended up in the World Cup finals against France, we'd all be rooting for Vatican City, right?

And then there's our Seahawks. My feeling is that, when they are projected to lose by two touchdowns, we all say, "We're the underdogs." And when they are projected to *win* by two touchdowns, we all say in our hearts, "We're *still* the underdogs." But this year will be different, right?

And in the Christian life, there are underdogs as well, don't you think? People you *hope* will be okay, emotionally and spiritually. People that you know God has his hand on, but you kinda wish he had a little tighter *grip on the shoulder*.

So there are underdogs in the Christian life. Let's name names. And guess what—it's me! And it's all of us! To paraphrase Pogo, we have met the underdog, and *it is us*.

And today's Gospel reading shows us why. The poor disciples! They start by asking Jesus to increase their faith! Maybe to deepen their relationship with God. Or to help them with a difficult friendship, or over a tough patch in their lives. And by the end of the passage, he's saying, "Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? [No.] So 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!'"

Not *just* slaves. But *worthless* slaves.

So we're underdogs because he expects us to fulfill a role that none of us want to fulfill. To claim a word for ourselves that—well, the history in our own country is our national shame, and the word "slave" was such an insult that if a Jew in the first century were to call his neighbor a slave, he could be excommunicated.

And it's not like slavery was a standard word in the practice of ancient religions. The Greeks valued their freedom above all things—just like we do. You could be a worshipper of one of the gods, a friend of one of the gods, and even a *relative* of one of the gods, but you were *never* their slave. Greeks never knelt in worship, for to kneel is the posture of a slave.

The same with the Jews. Moses was said to be the slave of God. David was said to be the slave of God. The prophets were said to be the slaves of God; Israel as a *nation* was a slave of God. But not ordinary Jews in the first century. Child of God, yes, but slave of God, never.

In Israel—as in slavery everywhere--the slave did not make their own decisions. Another person made decisions for him. The slave didn't even have to follow the Law, because... well, they didn't choices. The slave was the property of the owner and could be abused by the master without much recourse. In short, the slave lacked the one thing that, in the Greek world, gave life meaning. Freedom.

And here is Jesus with his demands. He demands absolute allegiance. He reaches in for our freedom, and takes it for his own. And in this passage he sets his demand in a very intimate of setting between two or more people: the table. Table is fellowship. It's no coincidence that many early dates are at restaurants

where two people can get to know one another in a safe but very personal setting. We break bread together and by that act we grow to love one another.

But the master eats first. And the slaves serve him.

What gives him this right? According to the New Testament, it is his right because he has redeemed us from our old slavery, slavery to sin and slavery to the gods of this world. “What he brings is the freedom which people can know... only if he binds them to him” (TDNT II:276). It is irony and irony in the Bible is deep irony but it is *healing* irony. It is his right because in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday he took water and a towel and performed the work of a *slave* for the disciples, washing their feet. Which were plenty dirty. Because it was an act that only *slaves* would perform, the disciples did not owe it to him to wash his feet. Because they had not yet been redeemed.

But what an astonishment for them. Only *this* act, the act of his washing their feet, would open their eyes to see his true character and his true mission. In the Upper Room they could not see the king anymore; they could see only the master who took on the *nature* of a slave becoming, as Paul writes, obedient to death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8).

The irony that the king would act as a slave. The paradox that what brings us freedom is binding ourselves to him. The intimacy of the settings for today’s passage, the table, and setting for the Upper Room. Intimacy and slavery.

The Greeks understood that freedom is not the absence of commitments but the ability to choose what we want. However, what they didn’t understand is that freedom always has to do with power. That the person with no money outside the restaurant can see choices on the menu, but has no power to pay for their meal. To quote Thucydides, “the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.” To every choice we must bear the heavy backpack of our dependencies, our shortcomings, and the oppressive influence of our history.

And freedom is also about the individual. We are not asked to be slaves to a system, or to a tradition, or to a theology. It is *demanding* that we be slaves to a *person*. And the reason is as simple as a business transaction. A person paid for us, so he owns us. He redeemed us in fact from slavery to things that are *not* a person; he freed us from slavery to the dependencies, to our shortcomings and to the oppressive influence of our histories; he liberated us from our ideologies, from our tradition and from our theologies. As a result, he owns us and makes us human again.

And, finally, freedom is about the imagination. The person at the restaurant—even if they have more money in their pocket than the most expensive item on the menu, is still constrained to choose something *from* the menu. But Jesus says to his slaves, to us, put the menu down. Order whatever your imagination can dream up. Maybe it’s ostrich enchiladas. Maybe it’s hearts of oak tree sautéed in... in frimfram sauce with the Ausen fay, with chafafa on the side.

Don’t worry about the skill of the cook; don’t worry about what’s back in the walk-in freezer—both are limitless!

And if you want, ask for more imagination. He’ll serve that up, too.

This is the experience of the underdog, the weak, the inexperienced, the regular person. To put down the menu of life and order whatever we want.

All of this is probably easier understood by means of illustration, so let’s turn to the epistle passage, from Second Timothy. All of us: we here in this room, the author, Timothy, Timothy’s mother Eunice and his grandmother, Lois--we all have traveled through the thrashing of dealing with the word “slave” and the

absolute allegiance that Christ demands, and come out on the other side. And we live with intimacy, this time not the intimacy of the table or the washing of feet but the intimacy of the affection that the author feels for Timothy, and we see that slavery to Christ is a highly emotional affair. One huge component of slavery to Christ is what we now call “emotional intelligence.” A greater understanding of the emotional life.

So Bob meets Bill on the street and says, “Hey, Bill, how are you doing today?” “I’m fine. How are you?” “I’m fine as well. You know, Bill, I’ve been working on my emotional intelligence, on my probing the depths of my emotional life.” “Wow, that sounds interesting.” “It sure is. But I need some practice. Do you mind if we begin our conversation again, this time with you starting?” “You bet. Hey, Bob, how are you doing today?”

“I’m good.”

See what I did there, Bill? I have *doubled* my emotional intelligence. Now it’s your turn. How are you doing, Bill?” “I’m good, too.” “That’s great. As you can see, I’m teaching *others* about the emotional life.”

There are apparently 5,000 words in the English language that have to do with emotions, and a lot of us restrict ourselves to just a few. But slavery to Christ means *emotional liberation*. Slavery to Christ means emotional liberation. And with a little exercise, we can keep in step with the Spirit (as Paul says) and go on one of the greatest adventures of our lives. Into our own emotional states.

Just look at all these juicy emotions in the first chapter of Second Timothy! Grace, mercy, peace, gratitude, tears, joy, cowardice, power, love, self-discipline, shame—the list goes on and on. We can be explorers of our own emotions, using an ever-increasing precision about our emotions in our thoughts and in our language. Instead of saying, “I’m fine,” or “I’m good,” how about, “I’m close to laughter today,” or “I feel powerful today,” or “I just can’t shake the Black Dog today.” We can get expertise in the language of our own emotions.

And it’s not just about our individual emotional state. Look at the depth of feeling in these relationships: gratitude by one party who remembers the other constantly with his prayers; the tears from the other, perhaps at their parting; the longing to be together again. The emotional life is a gift of the Spirit; it is power and love and self-discipline. We need not fear it. For we know the one in whom we have put our trust.

Pray for the shock. Pray for the jump start like the disciples had in the Upper Room, when Jesus did what only a slave would do. He washed his disciples’ feet, overcoming Peter’s bluster and self-sufficiency and manliness—he was not going to be served by the master. But Jesus responds, “Peter, let me stretch your imagination. Let me serve you, because there is no other way.” And then when he is finished, when they are still astounded by what he has, he pushes harder. “What you’ve seen me do to you,” he says, “do to one another.” In other words, be slaves to one another. Serve one another in the ultimate act of freedom.

And here, in Luke’s gospel, he takes the last step. Serve him. Serve the one who demands unconditional allegiance. Serve him with emotions; serve him with your mind; join with those who suffer for the Gospel; serve him with imagination; serve him by picturing what this congregation could be in two, three years. And then let’s make it happen. Serve him on the Bishop’s Committee, on the Altar Guild, in Faith Formation, in buying flowers, in ushering, in reading, in being a cheerful friend. Together. Let’s come and do Appreciative Inquiry together. Let’s put food on the table for Jesus. And we will see what God does... with the underdogs.