

Worthless Slaves Like Us
Proper 22C: Luke 17.5-10
October 2, 2022
The Rev. Scott Walters

Even if you've seen the inside our house, you may not have realized that one of the rarest art collections in the world hangs on its walls. It is the only collection in existence comprised entirely of pieces with backstories that include Ardelle and me.

One of my favorites hangs over our fireplace. It's a series of 60 photographs of Christ Church, Little Rock taken by my friend Tim Hursley. Here's its backstory. For Christ Church's 175th anniversary, Tim agreed to set up an ordinary surveillance camera in front of the church and let it run. He'd done this before, once at the top of a grain separator, and, most notably, in a field in Hale County, Alabama, where, for several years, he harvested images of an old silo that had been bent in half by a storm.

In Little Rock, we concocted a plan to affix a camera to one of those spreader bars truckers use to secure their loads, and Tim's intrepid assistant dropped a rope from the roof of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette building across the street, and belayed down to a window where he mounted the contraption. A cable ran back to a laptop in a greasy elevator shaft on the roof, and for the next year, an image dropped onto the hard drive of that computer every fifteen seconds. I'll help you with that math. That's more than two million photographs in the course of a year, less a few gaps from technical glitches.

The series above our mantle is from a night when the moon was full and seemed to roll right up the ridge of the church's roof and off into the night, while the red doors intermittently opened and closed, as people passed by on the sidewalk or stepped out to take a phone call on the steps, as city buses blurred their way past. Ardelle bought it from Tim for my 50th birthday. We picked it up from the framers as we were packing our house to move to Memphis, and it was among the first things we unwrapped and hung on the wall when we got here.

Before you'll see the obvious relevance of this story to yet another eye-crossing parable from the gospel of Luke, I need to tell you something else about Tim. He also happens to be one of the foremost architectural photographers in the country. He's photographed buildings by the likes of Frank Gehry, James Turrell, Philip Johnson, and Moshe Safdi. He even photographed a series for Andy Warhol in his factory back in the day.

But for this work, as you might have guessed, he doesn't use a camera you could pick up at Best Buy. He photographs with a large frame Sinar 4X5. Which means every shot is expensive, as in several dollars each just for the film. It's expensive, so a large frame photographer doesn't click away like some giddy grandpa with an iPhone at a t-ball game. Every photograph should be carefully set up, the light and angle and subject well considered before any film is exposed. He'll fly across an ocean for the chance to take a photo in what might amount to a fifteen minute window per day when the conditions are right.

So in contrast to all the intention and control that makes every shot of a great building count, at the church in Little Rock, the images just poured in and onto the hard drives Tim would take back to his dark and cluttered studio to scan through for gems like that night when the moon was full, which he compared to having a slot machine dump quarters into his lap.

Which, of course, brings us to Jesus, right? The guy who says, “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!’” See the connection? No? Well, I guess that means this sermon will have to ramble on a little longer then.

We’ve been rolling through the gospel of Luke here lately, which we used to think of as the sweet telling of the Good News that Linus turned to in that famous nativity play pinch. But Jesus says some weird stuff in this book. Like, “Who among you would say to your slave... ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would 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’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So 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!’”

So much for egalitarian Jesus, right? So much for Jesus the hierarchy buster. What are we to make or to do with sayings like these? Well, what I’d like us to think about today is what it might mean to admit that we aren’t as free than we think we are, and that acknowledging this truth might change how we live.

I don’t want to dismiss Jesus’s unsettling image of slave owning Christians too quickly. But since the punch line is about *being* slaves rather than owning them and ordering them around, it hardly seems like Jesus’s point was to condone owning other people and treating them badly just because you can. What he’s asking us is to see ourselves as people without that many rights, and as people with so many obligations that we may never manage to do a single good deed that we can take credit for.

That sounds like bad news, not gospel. But what if we reframe things in terms of the two kinds of Tim Hursley projects? So often we see our lives, and especially our Christian lives, as architectural photography projects. In other words, we can think our task is to frame every moment, every action, every thought carefully and faithfully so that it brings us a little closer to God, a little closer to goodness, a little closer to a life well lived and maybe even the salvation of our souls.

But, let’s face it. Whatever decisions we do get to make in this life are conditioned by a whole lot that we have no control over: parents, culture, biology, neighborhood, weather, maybe what we had for lunch. All kinds of experiences and accidents brought each of us to this particular moment. And while I do think we have some choice in how we move into the next moment, our tendency is to think we’re a lot more in control than we probably are. Our tendency is to downplay all those other factors—good, bad, or indifferent—that have made us the person who is about to decide to do the next thing.

This can be a hard truth to swallow for those of us who live in the so called land of the free. Then again, living when and where we do may make us people who especially need the uncensored Jesus who tells us bluntly that on some level we’re all worthless slaves, that we should get out of the business of taking credit for our lives and our goodness because we’re mostly just playing the hands we’ve been dealt.

I know. I know. That still might sound like bad news to you. But, consider this. Instead of seeing this life essentially as something we get to plan and frame and craft and produce, what happens when

we take less credit? What happens when we see life as something that mostly spills into our laps, like images from that jury-rigged surveillance camera onto a hard drive?

Well, one small thing probably happens immediately. We get a little less smug. We're bound to be a little less likely to separate ourselves from someone whom life has given a harder time. We're a little less judgmental, don't you think? But we're also potentially a little more giddy and thankful for whatever good God has dumped onto us so gratuitously. We're a little more like Tim in his studio sifting through the million little gifts the curious mix of light and moon and an old church building have produced.

There's something to be said for feeling more lucky than good. There's something to be said for living in the wake of grace. It's just another way of saying that we're at our best when we see the essence of our selves not as people who have earned and secured for ourselves what matters most in this life, but that a divine gift is at the center. We're worthless slaves not because we're empty of worth, but because we're not the ones who make ourselves worthy. Grace is a gift to each one of us by a loving and indiscriminate God. So why in the world do we spend so much time sorting out who is worth what in this life, especially in the Christian Church?

It's awfully late in this sermon to go back to the part of the gospel reading that would have been a lot more edifying to deal with, but let's do. Remember that bit about a mustard seed of faith being enough to make a mulberry tree walk into the sea? Well, maybe it's only when we've acknowledged that most of who we are has been shaped by forces beyond our control, forces we have no business taking credit for, maybe it's only then that we're ready to consider the power of faith.

Because faith, you see, isn't a great accomplishment either. It's a mustard seed. A tiny thing that's hardly visible, barely noticed. But faith, as Jesus describes it, is a small break in the necessity of things. Faith seems to be a kind of access to that slight infusion of grace and possibility that we're foolish to be proud of or take credit for. But even a grain of it can breed hope, and make an opening to a future that's not entirely determined by our past. Maybe mulberry trees don't have to stay put. Maybe another future is possible on the other side of wounds and failures we didn't think we could survive. Maybe, says faith. Just maybe.

"We are worthless slaves. We have done only what we ought to have done." You won't find that mantra in any self help manual. But if the church can be a community of honest humility and thankfulness to God about how we got wherever we are, and a community that nurtures the hope even a tiny seed of faith can create, lives will be changed. And guess what. All we need to be to embody that community are worthless slaves. You don't have to have gotten your stuff together. You don't have to be born on the right street or with the right name. You don't have to be smart enough or good enough or have a bucketload of faith in your heart. Jesus says that to be his people, we don't have to have made something else of our lives. We just have to be people—and whoever you are, you are one—whom life has made something of. Because nurturing that tiny seed of faith in worthless slaves like us has been Jesus's project all along.