

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Oct 24th 2017

Nothing is more surprising, and more characteristic, of Jesus than his teaching on how authority should be practiced among his followers. For Jesus, authority is expressed as slave-service, especially service in a meal setting. Consider the little parable in today's Gospel reading. The slaves are waiting at night for their master's return from a wedding. Loins girded and lamps lighted, the slaves are alert and ready when the master comes—quite late, apparently--and knocks at the door. The master is so pleased he surprises them by girding his own loins, makes them recline at table, and proceeds to serve them.

This behavior of the master is so important to Luke that takes an amazing liberty with the traditions about Jesus at the Last Supper. In his account of Jesus' ministry, Luke postpones the teaching on authority from where it occurs in Mark's Gospel—that is, after James and John request the number one and two spots when Jesus comes into his kingdom—and the other ten express their displeasure with that!—and saves that embarrassing moment for his rendition of the Last Supper. In that setting, right after Jesus prophesies that one of them would betray him, Luke writes that an argument broke out among them about which of them should be regarded as the greatest. It is at that moment that Luke writes that Jesus teaches about what it means to be a “great one” in the community of his disciples. To be the leader means to be the servant. And Jesus is the model: “I am among you as the one who serves.”

Whether this teaching occurred twice—or whether Luke moves the episode to this moment, the point is obvious for Luke's readers: The community who practices the Lord's Supper is called to exercise leadership by serving one another with the dedication expected of slaves.

The Evangelist John goes a step further. In his Gospel, Jesus literally girds his loins and performs the slave service of washing his disciples' feet. He then commands disciples—and all of us believers, of course—to wash one another's feet. Yes, slave service. Jesus' idea of authority is a little different from the way of the world.

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