

## "The Servants Due"

Luke 17:7-10

October 6, 2019

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost (LWML Sunday)

Here it is again: LWML Sunday. Why do we have LWML Sunday? Is it because LWML Sunday is always on the first Sunday in October and today is the first Sunday in October? In other words, do we do it because that's the way we've always done it before? That usually settles an argument in any Lutheran Church. Is it to share information about the Lord's work done by the LWML throughout our country and world? Is it to praise the women of the LWML and honor them for all of the hard work they've done in service to the Lord's mission? Is there some other reason?

The larger question here is why do we do anything? Are the stated reasons for doing something the same as the actual reason for doing it? For example, why do you give Christmas and birthday gifts to children, grandchildren, family, friends? The usual and obvious answer to that is because we love these people and want to show it. Why do we do favors for people who are in need? The stated reason is to help somebody in need. Why do women give of their time in the LWML or men give of their time in any office related to the Church? The answer usually given is to serve God.

All of these reasons for doing something are said to be purely altruistic. "Altruistic" is a word that means something done only for the sake and welfare of another person. This is what we claim that we do. But is that the case?

What happens if you do someone a favor and they don't thank you? Do you get miffed? Upset? Angry? Do you continue to do favors for that person? If you give birthday gifts or Christmas gifts to people, relatives or friends, and they never write a thank you note, never say thanks, or may never even acknowledge receipt of gift, what do you do? Do you get upset? Do you decide never to send gifts to that person again? What happens if you work hard as a loyal member of the LWML or in any position of leadership in our congregation, and your efforts are not noticed and you are never thanked? What do you do? Do you become bitter? Do you quit the position because they don't appreciate you?

As natural and common as these situations are, they reveal the truth that we don't want to think about. These reactions show that our stated reason for doing something is not always the real reason we do something. In other words, it's not all altruistic. Some of these things we do, we do not just in order to help someone else, but in order to receive something in return. It may not be our whole motivation for participation, but our negative reactions to how our services are received shows that it's part of it.

Some people give gifts in order to get gifts and return. Some people give gifts with the expectation that they will be thanked for it. Some people do favors in order to feel good when they are thanked. Some women may participate in LWML in order to feel good about their service to the Lord. The same is true for serving within the church. We desire to be acknowledged, honored, and praised for what we do. Again,

we may not consciously be thinking that, but look at our reaction when these things do not happen.

This practice of thinking of one's self over and above one's neighbor is really the essence of sin. Sin is not always simply doing evil things that hurt others. The old church fathers used to refer to sin as "love turned in on itself." In addition to doing evil, sin is also loving or serving others with the expectation or demand that something is received in exchange for it. It is not pure love, but it is a strong love as evidenced by its place in the Law of God where He explains how strongly we are to love our neighbor. He says, "And you shall love your neighbor, as you love your self."

We would like to think that the whole problem could be solved if people would just say "thank you" more often. However, that is a symptom of the problem but not the problem itself. This strong love for self is a part of who we are as sinful human beings. Sin entered this world when humanity loved themselves, more than they loved God and His Word. It has described humanity ever since that time.

While we may think that we have a right to be offended by people's reaction to us, Jesus Christ is the only one who can rightly be justified in being offended by people's reactions to Him. He is holy both in action and in motivation. He shows us the love of God – agape – that totally selfless love which God has for the world. Jesus has that love for us and it's borne out in how he lived and in what he did. As He said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

Serving is always easier to talk about than it is to do. Serving, without any qualms or qualifications, boils down to one thing: obedience. It was the will of God to save us from our sin and from everything that results from sin – guilt and shame; corruption and death; hell and eternal damnation. Although obedience to His Father's will would require Jesus to suffer our punishment and die our death, Jesus did it. As St. Paul writes to the Philippians, "he made himself nothing, taking the form of the servant, being born in the likeness of men,. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:7-8)

All this Jesus did in order to earn our forgiveness, restore our life, and gain our salvation. That is a great thing He did. Imagine if he acted like us and did it in order to receive something back from us. What could we possibly give to Him that would be worth all that He did for us? And, as sinners, living in opposition to God, we would never want to do that.

However, Jesus does not do for us in order to get something from us. In fact, it is just the opposite. The Word of God says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous man – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6-8) Jesus did for us because we could not do for Him. He simply did what a servant should do. He obeyed His Father in order to gain our salvation and did not wait for us to do something in return.

Jesus' humility and selfless actions on our behalf changes us. Our status before God is one of forgiven children. Our status before the world is of humble servants. The Word of God says, "do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2:3-5) We are to have the mind of Christ which results in service without any qualification, prerequisite, or anything in return.

This is the point of the short parable Jesus tells in our text for today. He uses the culture of the day to teach us how we are to live as servants of God. He makes three points. First, the master does not serve the servant, but the servant serves the master. Second, the master does not thank the servant for doing what he was commanded. Third, servants are not to expect rewards or commendation for obeying their master. It is who they are and what they do as servants.

The Lord, our Master, has in fact served us by giving His life upon the cross and by rising again from the dead. He serves us in Divine Service. Here, he provides us with His Word and His body and Blood for the forgiveness of our sin, the strengthening of our faith, and the encouragement in our life of service.

In response to this, we serve Him by serving one another. We don't deserve any commendation or praise for what we have done because we are simply doing that which He has commanded. In fact, when we are praised, commended, or made a big deal of, Jesus says, "So you also, when you have done all that you are commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"

This insight is very helpful and freeing. When having this attitude, we are free to serve with joy, and not bitterness, because we don't need the positive feedback. Keeping that attitude in the forefront of our consciousness means that we will always enjoy serving because we are doing it for the right reasons and not in order to gain something in return.

This is not to say that commending someone, thanking someone, or praising someone for a job well done is wrong or sinful. These are good things to do and I'm not speaking against them. However, these things are simply not necessary. The LWML is a good example of this. Although we hold this special day on the first Sunday in October of every year, we are not doing it because the ladies demand to be recognized or are looking for commendation. The ladies would continue to perform their acts of service, I'm convinced, whether we had this special day or not. We have this day in order to praise and commend God for all the work that He has accomplished through this organization in spreading the Gospel, showing God's love, and serving Him in whatever way the Lord has need of them.

When I first arrived here, many people were a bit stunned when they would come out of church and say, "Good sermon, pastor!" I would respond by saying, "Well, thank the Lord for that." I was diverting attention away from myself and directing it to the Lord. It was my version of what our text today says, "I am an unworthy servant; I've only done what was my duty." This made people uncomfortable. Someone actually told me they thought it meant I didn't like the complement.

This is certainly a new and different way of thinking. To serve because it is my duty and not because it makes me feel good. To do what God says because He has told us to do so and not because I think it is a good idea. To obey because it is what God wills and not in order to be thanked. To serve, help, and be kind to our neighbors without expecting gratitude, praise, or commendation. Yet this is what Jesus did and to what Jesus calls us to do. The more we think about it and the more we put it into practice, the less strange it will feel and the more natural it will become. May Jesus' words encourage us in this endeavor, "So you also, when you have done all that you are commanded, say, ' We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" Amen