

A boss, who was on vacation, called back to his office and asked the person he left in charge, 'Is everything OK at the office?' The man replied, "It's all under control. It's been a very busy day. I haven't stopped to take a break all day." "Can you do me a favor?" the boss asked. "The man said, "Of course, what is it?" "Pick up the pace a little. I'm in the foursome behind you."

The gospel we just heard gets us from faith into faithfulness, from words to deeds, from religion as doctrine to religion as life. And it does so through a story about authority, service and power.

So first, a bit of reflection on our current situation. 2 parents meet with shopping carts in the grocery store check-out line. They swap small talk of soccer schedules and to-do lists. Soon the conversation turns to the children themselves. In the check-out lane beside them, a small child is throwing a tantrum because his mother refuses to buy him a toy and some candy at the check-out counter. After a brief resistance, the exhausted mom crumbles, and she buys the kid the candy and the toy. Observing the scene from the safety of their own check-out line, one of the 2 parents says to the other, "You know the remarkable thing about our society is the way parents obey their children."

We have to admit that the normal rules of authority are somewhat topsy-turvy. And this chaos is not reserved to parent-child relationships. Many teachers lament the loss of respect from students at school. The military reports a shocking breakdown of command on the battlefield. Employers decry the lack of workers who are loyal and honest and hard-working, with a work force weakened by employees who seem to view their work and their employers as if their job were their divine right and they can perform it how, when and as they like.

Many commentators on our current age are using the phrase 'an age of entitlement.' We tend to think that no matter our age or rank we should get the same level of power, money, and control as the boss. And certainly there have been abuses of power that have given rise to this upside-down reversal of authority. But lines of authority and power are not necessarily evil, and do not always oppress the less powerful. In fact, as much as we may fantasize about autonomy and power, we would do well to remember that everyone must eventually find their place under someone's authority if a civil society is to survive. We are grateful that traffic laws keep drivers on the right side of the road, and slow in school zones. We're glad to see that sign posted in a restaurant restroom, 'Employees must wash hands before returning to work.' We're glad someone enforces environmental regulations to keep companies from dumping hazardous wastes in our drinking water. Each of these rules limits someone's autonomy for the sake of the common good. And it takes authority to enforce these laws, authority that we each submit to for our own welfare, as well as the welfare of others.

Without authority, chaos reigns. And without authority, even in this 'land of the free,' we would fall into anarchy. And yet, there is something within us that resists authority, that longs for a paradise without structure, without anyone telling us what to do or limiting our choices. And maybe this is just the desire to be independent, the most cherished goal of most adults. But if pushed too far, such a paradise would become hell on earth.

Second, what the scriptures have to say about this. Jesus' parable about the slave and master certainly rubs us the wrong way as people who prize personal freedom so highly. Jesus compares our relationship to God as a man who had a household servant who served him in both his field and his home. After working in the field, the servant was ordered to prepare and serve a meal as well. And Jesus makes the comment that this servant should not feel entitled to some sort of merit, or bonus points, from the master for this service. It

was simply his role in the household, and in society. The servant was supposed to serve, plain and simple. And when he did so, he should not think that he was worthy of special thanks.

In our society characterized by 40 hour work weeks, overtime pay, and labor unions, this just feels wrong. How could the master expect the servant to work in the kitchen after working in the field all day? And if he did, why would the servant not feel entitled to some extra thanks? First, we should know that this was an actual reality in households that may have just one slave – and that one slave had to do everything. And slaves would not have had expectations like modern, paid workers. Jesus was simply describing a normal workday for a normal household slave. Nothing extravagant or extraordinary in this service. Just an ordinary day.

Third, it is clear that Jesus wants us to see ourselves as the servant in this parable, not the master. The role of master has already been filled by God. The question is whether we are willing to submit to God as His servants. We are not God's partners. We are not His peers. We can only see ourselves as servants to God, called to obedience to His authority. And when we serve, when we sacrifice, when we obey, we must relinquish all sense of entitlement to God's reward. God does reward His servants, but only when they serve without thinking about rewards.

If we can only serve God by calculating the square feet of our mansion in heaven, or the number of stars in our crown, we may not be so much a servant as a calculating investor. And God has not put out a call for investors. If we want applause and recognition for our service, high-fives in the spiritual endzone for our Kingdom touchdowns, we may not be so much a servant as an aspiring star. But God is not enlisting showboats or prima donnas. He only seeks servants. Servants who are free from the shackles of entitlement, who know that grace is just that – pure grace, pure gift. And it is a gift to serve as Christ served. I'm sure all of us can only understand this, accept this – and try to live it – if we are deeply humble – and that's another dimension added to this already challenging gospel. There has never been a big outbreak of humility in America!

The point here is that we should be grateful for the privilege of service that God has given to us in our baptism, renewed in our confirmation, and reaffirmed every time we say 'Amen' to the Eucharist. We should be grateful to be a servant of God's kingdom household. And when grace comes, when rewards are given by the generous and gracious God who is our Master, the only appropriate response from us should be surprise – and thanks. Amen. (adapted from GRACEWORKS, 2 October 2022)