

## Advent

# The Other Side of the Tray

Frankton – 12/14/14

Scripture: Luke 1.39-45

Proposition: The joy of the Lord is in Service to the Lord.

A woman recalls the time when she was waiting tables and had a tray full of drinks, and then had the misfortune of crashing into her manager, causing them both to tumble completely to the floor. The waitress, however, while falling, managed to keep the drink tray she was carrying horizontal enough, so that even as she lay on the floor, no drink was spilled, and not a glass was broken. It was such a spectacular performance that the customers, far from chuckling at her clumsiness, instead gave her a rousing cheer and round of applause! Unfortunately, such responses are rare.

**[SLIDE]** Waitresses. They're hauling heavy trays. Crashing into co-workers. Being poked and grabbed; propositioned to and yelled at. They have to smile and be nice to rude customers all the while receiving lousy tips. It can be a brutal way to make a buck. Waitressing is an honorable profession to be sure, and some wait staff make good money. You're not going to get rich working as a waitress. Most waitresses work hard for their money with not much more than bruises and bunions to show for the effort.

Some have written that waitresses "watch, witness or are part of every upheaval, uproar, tradition, trend, debate and issue." You might even say that everything that happens in the world happens on a waitress's shift - think business meetings, wedding receptions, even protest movements. One of the first skirmishes in the civil rights struggle of the 1960s occurred at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, when black students defied the practices of the day by bravely sitting down at a lunch counter for white folks and ordering a piece of apple pie. Waitresses. From the other side of the tray, they have witnessed historical events and human conflicts, and through times of chaos and confusion have tried to remain good and faithful servants.

There are some that argue that the world is divided into two kinds of people: those on the customer side of the tray, and those on the waitress side of the tray. On the customer side are the proud and the powerful; on the waitress side are the humble and the harassed. In today's society, and maybe down through the ages, far too many customers assume that waitresses are low-class women without skills; they are beneath conversation and consideration and all they are good for is to refill the coffee cups. Too often, waitresses are snubbed, underpaid and ignored. Welcome to life on the other side of the tray.

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It's the waitress side of the tray with which Mary, the mother of Jesus, was all too familiar. Along with other women of first-century Galilee, Mary was a second-class citizen, deemed not worthy of conversation or consideration. She had little or no authority, and virtually no rank or status in her culture. Now, this is not to suggest that the waitresses at the Rachel's or the Lincoln or any other local restaurant are second-class citizens. It is rather to put them in the same company as Mary who saw herself as a [SLIDE] *servant of the Lord*. [38] A servant, one who was waiting upon the Lord.

Do you remember last week? Last week we talked about Mary's visit from the angel. The angel told her that she had found favor with God and would conceive a son through the power of the Holy Spirit. This young boy would be named Jesus and he would grow to be the one that the Jews were looking for – the Messiah. The angel also tells Mary something Mary didn't know: that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant *in her old age* [36] proving that with God anything is possible. Mary responded by saying that she would indeed be the Lord's servant.

Sometime shortly after the angel left her, Mary headed off to her cousin, Elizabeth's, house. I think there is one main reason she did that. If you had been Mary and had seen an angel; wouldn't you at some point begin to wonder if it was true? Wouldn't you wonder if maybe, just maybe, you had been dreaming? But during the angel's visit, he told Mary a piece of information she could check out to see if she had been dreaming or if the angel was real. The angel had appeared to Mary and told her what was to come, but he also told her something she could check out right now – Elizabeth's pregnancy. So I think Mary headed off to Elizabeth's, at least in part, to check things out for herself; to answer the question, "Was it real?"

Remember, the angel appeared to Mary in the town of Nazareth, some 50 miles north of Jerusalem where Elizabeth lived. So, Mary had lots of time to think as she walked the 50 miles to Jerusalem – a three day trip. She probably thought a lot about the angel and what he said and had a lot of questions. Was she really going to have a baby outside of wedlock? Is this really the way the Messiah should come? What would people think about her? What would Joseph think about her? But her main question was always: Did the angel really appear to her or was it was all a dream. And she probably decided that if the one piece of information she could fact check was true (Elizabeth's pregnancy), then her experience with the angel probably wasn't because of some bad goat milk she drank. When Mary gets to Elizabeth's house, she discovers that her encounter with the angel was no mere dream. Elizabeth was indeed pregnant. So, the one fact that the angel told her that she could check was true.

For her part, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and tells Mary that Mary has been blessed by God and that her child is blessed. [42] And before Mary can tell Elizabeth about the angel, Elizabeth calls Mary: [SLIDE] *the mother of my Lord*. [43] These two things, calling Mary blessed and calling her mother of our Lord, both affirm and confirm what the angel had told Mary.

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Elizabeth is a huge help to Mary, confirming the angel's visit, giving support, offering encouragement and sharing a sense of overflowing joy. She told Mary that when Elizabeth first heard Mary's voice, the child in her womb [SLIDE] jumped *for joy*. [44]

There's that word again from last week: joy. Last week, we talked about how we sometimes refuse joy in our lives. Today we can look throughout the gospel of Luke and see joy emerge again and again. The Christmas angels told the shepherds of the tidings of great joy. [2.10] Jesus told his followers that they should leap for joy at the trials that will await them because of following him. [6.23] When the 72 people Jesus sent out in his name to share his story came back to him, they came in joy saying that even the demons obeyed them. [10.17] Jesus said there would be joy in heaven when even one sinner repents. [15.7] and finally, after Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles returned to Jerusalem with great joy. [24:52]

So, two themes begin to emerge: [SLIDE] servanthood and joy. One follows the other. On this Third Sunday of Advent, we are reminded that authentic Christian living requires a sense of service. It will inevitably - if done right - put us on the other side of the tray, serving people, waiting on others, ministering to the needy, lifting up the fallen. We can go back to Jesus speaking in Matthew when he told us to give water to the thirsty, food to the hungry, clothes to the needy, and time to those who are sick or in prison. Those are acts of service that are easy to follow. John Wesley would call them acts of Charity, and he would encourage us to do them with vigor. He would encourage us to live a life of service to others.

But such a life will also bear the fruit of joy: the joy of forgiveness, of healing, of mission, of new life, of inclusion in the family of God. So often we forget this, especially at Christmastime, when our joy is swamped by the pressure to feel happy about parties and pageants and presents under the Christmas tree. Christian joy, when you think about it, is both simpler and more significant than Christmas happiness. Happiness is linked to festivities, while joy is tied to forgiveness; happiness is about new things, while joy is about new life; happiness comes from finding a way to keep the peace between assorted aunts and uncles after three days of Christmas togetherness, while joy comes from finding our place in the family of God.

Joy. It's what Jesus came to earth to give us, and what Elizabeth helps Mary to feel as she discovers her destiny as the mother of the Lord. Not that we should be surprised that Elizabeth is in touch with joy - after all, she is rejoicing in the child she herself is carrying in the womb, believing the child to be a gift from God. Elizabeth believed it because she was in her old age, and had been barren all her life; therefore considered a lesser wife because of her barrenness. Now she was six months pregnant with a miracle baby. There can certainly be joy on the other side of the tray.

After receiving Elizabeth's blessing, Mary bursts into a song of praise. We call her song: the Magnificent." She praises God and says that her spirit rejoices in God and then she says this:

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[SLIDE] *for he took notice on his lowly servant girl.* [1.48] God could have selected a queen or a princess or an aristocratic heiress to be the mother of the Lord, but he doesn't. Instead, God goes for the weary teenager doing the swing shift at the Galilee Grill, trying to make her way through life the best she can. It's a surprising selection, but it shows God's hand - it reveals the plan for God's ongoing involvement in the world. God has: [SLIDE] *filled the hungry with good things.* [1.53] says Mary. It's a fascinating line that suggests the image of God as Waiter, feeding those who are hungry and clearing the table of those who have been filled. If you are in need, God will help you.

Jesus followed this same path when he matured and began to wait on the spiritually starving people of the world. After he broke bread and shared wine with his disciples at the Last Supper, a dispute arose about which one of his followers was to be regarded as the greatest. Now Jesus knew very well that a customer is usually regarded as being greater than a waiter, but he turned these expectations on their head. He asked his disciples who was more important: those being served or those doing the serving. He answers his own question by saying that the one being served is more important. Then, as he does so often, he goes on to change things up. [SLIDE] *But not here! For I am among you as one who serves.* [LK 22.27] I'm a servant, insists Jesus, not a customer. In effect, he was challenging his disciples to take their place on the other side of the tray.

Tom Oden, theologian and well-known author of a number of books, says that [SLIDE] "We lead by serving and we serve by leading." However, we must be careful. There is a difference between servanthood and servitude. Servitude is imposed; servanthood is embraced. Servitude enslaves; servanthood emancipates. Servitude denigrates; servanthood uplifts. Servitude crushes; servanthood fulfills. Servitude despairs; servanthood rejoices! And there is the key to Christmas joy. The little-known secret of Christmas is that our joy is full when we study and learn from Mary as a servant, God as a servant, Jesus as a servant, and become servants ourselves. When we do, our joy will be full.