

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Nov 10th 2015

Memorial of Saint Leo the Great, Pope and Doctor of the Church

North American readers who are familiar with Garrison Keillor's "Lake WoBeGone" monologues on "Prairie Home Companion," will recall the name of the Catholic Church in Keillor's imaginary town, "Our Lady of Perpetual Obligation." The servant in today's Gospel reading might well have been what Keillor had in mind. Having finished the outdoor chores, now he has to fix dinner for his master – before he himself has so much as a bite! – not exactly what we might envision in today's employment climate.

And to heighten the contrast, note that Jesus asks his audience if they could imagine the master in this story telling the servant to make himself comfortable while the master fixed dinner for him. Jesus expected and would have received a resounding "NO!" It would be unheard of! Would the servant have had a right to such special treatment? Again, "NO!" As the servant says, "we have only done our duty."

Clearly, moreover, Jesus in His Galilean ministry, was with his disciples as master, and they, as servants. Both understood that. So far so good. It all fit usual social and cultural expectations. And yet, amazingly, Jesus proved to be with them, ultimately, not as master after all, but as servant, as John's story of the washing of the disciples' feet makes clear – a point further reinforced in Chapter 2 of the letter to the Philippians, where Jesus is described as taking the form of a slave/servant. In this passage what the disciples couldn't imagine turned out to be exactly what the reign of God is like. How upsetting to society it would be if the world actually were to run that way. No wonder we preface the Lord's Prayer at Mass with "We dare to say . . ." We dare when, in that prayer we ask God to inaugurate His Reign among us. It would be so upsetting!

There are a few "take-aways" in this passage for us today.

First, the gospel message is profoundly counter-cultural. It was in Jesus' time; it still is today. We can't make it otherwise.

Second, God's gift (His fixing dinner for His servant in this story), as is so apparent throughout the gospels, is altogether unmerited. If we follow the rules; if we are religiously observant – even pious – we accrue no credit. Just doing our duty gives us no claim on God. The book-keeping approach to the practice of our religion doesn't work. I think most of us know this; still, it is so counter-cultural that we need reminding, over and over.

Robert Heaney-John A. Creighton University Professor Emeritus