



“Called to Serve as an Unprofitable Servant”

Homily

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*Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels
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Scriptures:

Isaiah 61: 1-3

Hebrews 12: 1-6

Luke 17: 7-10

The Gospel which we just heard is one of my favorites primarily because it has spoken to me so powerfully both as I approached official retirement, and after retiring.

Picture in your imagination this servant who has just come in after spending a long and tiring day out in the hot sun tending the farm for his master. Just what was he doing? What we are all called to do as laborers in the field: plowing the fields for a good harvest, or tending the sheep and other animals. Both are also pastoral activities for us as priests: plowing the fields, sowing the seeds of faith, cultivating the small plants as they grow in the life of Jesus, weeding the rows from sin and evil. A marvelous description of what we are called to do in our daily ministry!

And tending the flocks: leading the flock to green pastures, finding springs for them to drink, watching over them so that wild animals do not snatch them, looking out for injured or lame sheep, and protecting them—even with our lives.

Now picture the servant coming back to the main house dirty, tired, hot, and worn out. He is ready for a good bath, a cool drink, and a hot meal. He has deserved it. But Jesus' story tells us something different. The servant's day is not done. True, his field work is done, but he is called to shift from outside work to indoor work—preparing a meal and drink for his master. “Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink.” This is not some undue burden; rather, it's expected of him. His life is one of service 24/7, as we would say today.

And only after those duties are completed, does he get to wind down: “You may eat and drink when I am finished.” Jesus then adds quite pointedly: “Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.’”

That’s how I long to be remembered— as an unprofitable servant. And it is in reality how I actually am remembered by many—a grace for which I give thanks to God.

When Archbishop José Gomez became our active Archbishop on March 1, 2011, I formally completed my years of toil in the fields and with the flock, and I am accepting God’s invitation to live out my remaining years as his unprofitable servant.

Our American culture which focuses on “me” and “mine,” a debilitating narcissism that constantly looks inward and not outwards towards others, would compel me and others in priestly ministry to point with pride to our “legacies and our accomplishments.” But we who are chosen to be men and women in total and self-giving service to our people don’t “do legacies.” I prefer the image of the servant in the Gospel; I am finishing up one phase of God’s call in my life, and moving on to the next. Not as a laureate, but as a weak shepherd who happens to want to serve God’s mystery, knowing, as one spiritual writer once put it: “We serve a mystery, and serve it poorly”.

The true servant of Jesus flees from honors, from recognition, from the absurdity of legacies. Our goal is to follow Jesus who calls us in ways far different from the values of the world; in Jesus’ words: “Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” [Matthew 20:28], and “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” [Matthew 16:24]. We don’t find “legacies” in those challenging words or images of Jesus.

I have often wondered what the servant thought about when it was finally time for him to relax and to have his supper. I suspect that being a committed servant, he mentally re-traced his day to see which of his work activities were productive, and where he made mistakes—and how to improve tomorrow.

As I reflect back on my own years of ministry, those words of Jesus resonate so deeply within me: "...say, 'We are unprofitable servants.'" My own failures, sins, and mistakes loom high on the horizon over the span of years, and I feel the helplessness of knowing I can't turn back the clock and correct them. While my failures and mistakes are far too many to count, two dark and foreboding clouds hover in the skies above me, and there is nothing I can do to dispel them; they will haunt me until the end of my earthly journey.

The first dark cloud was the difficult and impossible clash in the San Joaquin Valley between the farmers and the farmworkers. Back in the 1960s farmworkers began organizing themselves in order to receive better wages, to improve their working conditions, and to negotiate for benefits which so many other workers took for granted. All of my efforts to try to bring about reconciliation among the parties brought little success. Those were frustrating and challenging years for me as I watched my meager efforts dissolve month after month, year after year.

It is hard for me to re-visit that period of time from 1965 to 1980. My soul keeps raising the "what if" questions: what if I had found better paths to bring together growers and workers to recognize the rights of each other? What if I had been a stronger voice on behalf of the farmworkers in order to help increase their salaries and benefits? What if I had dared taking more risks in order to be a better instrument of God's peace and justice?

Instead, I now look back on those years, realizing that any progress was far outdistanced by the paltry efforts which I brought to assist the thousands of poor farmworkers and their families living such difficult and tragic lives.

The second black and ominous cloud was the scourge of the clergy sexual misconduct of minors. This dreadful experience proved yet again the fact that I was and remain an unprofitable servant.

I don't recall ever hearing about any such clergy misconduct cases during my years in the Diocese of Fresno, 1962 to 1980; in the Diocese of Stockton, I encountered three cases in the year before being named to Los Angeles. I was stunned to learn that any priest could possibly harm children and youth in this dreadful manner.

From 1986 on, however, this unthinkable evil would gradually begin to rise from the murky darkness. And it would seem to never end. My early efforts failed to grasp the depth and extent of this sinfulness, and I searched in vain for answers and how best to proceed. I did not understand how deeply victims of sexual abuse were permanently afflicted; that would only emerge in later years. Almost daily I proved to be unequal to the task.

It was not until the early 1990s that several things became clearer: anyone in ministry who had been credibly found to abuse a minor could never return to ministry; victims needed urgent and continuing pastoral care for years to come; all of our Church apostolates needed to be fully vigilant against allowing anyone to be with children and youth who could possibly be a danger to them.

But it was those early years of the scandal which are the most haunting for me since my response was not fully that of an apostle of Jesus Christ. How I wish I could return to those years with today's understandings and undo all of my mistakes and failures.

“We have done what we were obliged to do.” Jesus' words don't mean that we have done everything correctly, promptly, and with great wisdom. Rather, in my case I believe that I did my best to carry out what I was truly obliged to do, and far too often came up very short. That's how it is with us humans, fragile vessels of God's grace.

But living out my life as an unprofitable servant doesn't mean there is no value to be found there. Today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews captures well the attitude which must be in all who are disciples of Jesus: we continue forward as disciples and as workers in the Lord's fields “while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.” Everyone is called to lift their eyes from their many mistakes and errors, and keep their focus on the face of Jesus.

While I have suffered a great deal from my numerous mistakes and omissions, still I don't meet the high standard in Hebrews: “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood.” That's true: my name and reputation have been under attack over the years now—as befits a fallible minister of Christ's grace—but so far, I have been spared shedding my blood for Jesus.

I am reminded that discipline is one tool which the Master uses to correct the unprofitable servant; and discipline can lead to humility, a virtue which becomes a strong anchor for servants who are yet called by Jesus to become his friends. St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* discusses our call to imitate the humility of Jesus who emptied himself of God's glory and took up our human nature. But Ignatius points out that sometimes Jesus calls us to the deeper kind of humility—humiliation. It has become ever clearer in my own life journey that public humiliation often becomes an essential aspect of living as a follower of Jesus. This is the prayer which Ignatius places on our reluctant lips:

“I desire and choose poverty with Christ poor, rather than riches; insults with Christ loaded with them, rather than honors; I desire to be accounted as worthless and a fool for Christ, rather than to be esteemed as wise and prudent in this world. So Christ was treated before me.” [No. 167]

Flawed servants of Jesus are not pessimists nor fatalists. Rather, we must be people of the joy, hope, and mercy of Jesus Christ as we live out our lives and our ministry. We keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and our hearts on the call of Isaiah in our first Scripture: “The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, . . . to comfort all who mourn;” [Isaiah 61:1-3]

And we unprofitable servants of Jesus are in good company: moving among the sick, the abandoned, the struggling, the outcasts, the undocumented, the abused, and the maligned. That's where we belong.

Not everyone is called to serve Jesus as an unprofitable servant. I feel blessed to be included in that group, and each day in retirement I am finding new and ever more exciting ways to be of service to the Lord staying on the periphery and in the shadows with those who feel the weight and burdens of being on the margins—but also, with those most loved by Jesus.

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day, a feast-day made more real for us with our Cathedral's 25 beautiful tapestries featuring 125 men and women who lived out their discipleship with Jesus in heroic fashion. My personal patron saint, St. Joseph, is the first

one in this tapestry on this wall. If there was ever a saint whose life was that of a humble servant, it was Joseph. He lived out his life in total obedience to God's will. We see him confront several difficult challenges in that life—taking in marriage an unwed mother; fleeing into Egypt when his family is under a death sentence; moving to a new town to start all over again. No recorded words remain; no description of his years at Nazareth. No recounting of his death and burial. Joseph simply fades from the pages of salvation history. Like a devoted servant.

As we look about these tapestries, we can easily recall many more examples of men and women whose lives and ministries were filled with mistakes, opposition, ridicule, rejection, personal humiliation, suffering, torture, and death. A good number of them in their own day would surely have considered themselves unprofitable servants.

Today I am grateful to God for this special vocation, but I am also grateful to my brother Bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, and lay ministers and wonderful people who have accepted me despite my failings, and who have sustained me through their prayers and support along the journey towards the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

I earnestly request your continuing prayers for me and for all of those gathered here this afternoon. Each one of you has shared our faith journeys together especially in this portion of the Lord's Vineyard.

When it's your time to come in from the fields of active ministry, hopefully you, too, will find the inner peace and joy I have experienced. Remember, the same Jesus who told us to say, to proclaim, to shout: "We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do," also lovingly says to us, as he did to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants but my friends and companions."