Jesus said, "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'we are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" (Luke 17:10)

If you paid attention back in your High School literature class, then you may remember the legend of Alexander the Great and the Gordian Knot. The story goes that long before Alexander began his conquests, a peasant farmer named Gordius was plowing his fields near Phrygia. Suddenly, a flock of birds descended on the oxen pulling the plow, and Gordius took this to be some sort of omen. He went to consult one of the local seers, who turned out to be a beautiful maiden. She told Gordius that the birds were a sign that he would be a king. Furthermore, since no king should be without a gorgeous queen, “how about marrying me,” is essentially what she said. In thanksgiving for what could only be taken as a good day so far, Gordius went to the local temple to pay homage to the gods. It so happened that the Phrygian king had just died without an heir. The leaders of the city had been told that the first man to arrive in a cart would be their king. So along came Gordius with his cart and new wife (who probably masterminded the whole thing!), and they crowned him king. To remind himself always of his humble beginnings, Gordius fastened his oxcart to a post at the temple with a huge knot that was seemingly impossible to untie: the Gordian Knot.

Gordius was a good king. After his dynasty died out the legend arose that the true test of Asia’s next ruler would be the ability to unravel the Gordian Knot. Many people of great strength and wisdom came to try, but the knot was too tight for all of them. It had no apparent beginning or ending. It was unsolvable, unmovable. At length the great Macedonian conqueror Alexander arrived with his army to camp for the winter. He’d heard the legend of the Gordian Knot, and he stood before it transfixed by its complexity and strength. Knowing the symbolic value of undoing the knot, but also knowing that he too would fail by conventional means, Alexander unsheathed his sword and proceeded to slice through it. So much for the Gordian Knot. So much for the ties that bind humility with leadership. From there Alexander went on to rule all of the known world.

The first time I heard how Alexander the Great defeated the Gordian Knot, the story inspired me. It told me that no conundrum could forever elude a human solution. What is more, it told me that after the best thinking and conventional means of problem-solving fail to unravel whatever enigmas impede our way, even brute force and impatient strength have their usefulness in surmounting life’s challenges. The story of the Gordian Knot celebrates the human potential to overcome any obstacle, perhaps even Congressional gridlock. It’s a story that can bolster anyone’s self-esteem. It’s a story that we vastly prefer to the short, little-known parable that Jesus told in today’s Gospel reading from Luke (17:5-10).

Today’s parable has no popular title, as do many of the others that Jesus told: The Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Lost Sheep. What do you call this one? The Parable of the Returning Servant is the best that commentators can do. The parable is sketchy, leaving many blanks for our imaginations to fill. Jesus asked his audience to envision a small farm typical of their day. The household staff would consist of one servant whose duties included, among other things, the tending of sheep and plowing in the field. The servant works exceptionally hard, and what he hopes for as a reward at the end of the day is a place at the master’s table. As many before him and after him have done, the servant stands at the Gordian Knot of class distinction, transfixed by its complexity and strength. Yet the servant believes he
can overcome these artificial barriers. It’s not that he wants to rule all of Asia Minor and sit in the Emperor’s chair. No, he merely wants to sit in one of the chairs at the master’s table. With such a goal in mind the servant exerts great effort in the fields to prove his worth. What he hopes to hear the master say is, “Come here at once and take your place at the table.”

What do you think: will the servant be able to undo the Gordian Knot that holds him back from the master’s table? We like to think that he will. We like to think that by trying his hardest and doing his best, the servant’s reward will be a place at the master’s table. Sorry to say, it’s wishful thinking. Years ago I clipped from the newspaper a story that somewhat comically illustrates what will be the futility of the servant’s efforts. In Brazil a young artist was dumped by his girlfriend. She did not love him. “I just want to be friends,” is my guess at how she broke the news. Undaunted, the artist arrived at a scheme to win her back. He would crawl on his knees the nine miles from his house to hers and beg for another chance. Surely, such a deed would be irresistible, and turn her heart. He informed the media, and with pieces of car tire strapped to his knees, he completed the journey in 14 hours. When he arrived exhausted, yet triumphant, at his beloved’s house, he discovered that no one was home. She’d deliberately left to avoid seeing him. She did not love him, and no amount of effort, or bravado, or grand gesture was going to seat him at her table. Likewise, the hard-working servant receives no reward, and hears from the master at the end of the day only the command to do more work: Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink. Even worse, Jesus comments that the proper response from the servant and from you and me under such circumstances is only this: “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” Thanks, a lot, Jesus. I’ll keep that in mind the next time I am struggling with my self-esteem.

What is Jesus really talking about in this parable? Make no mistake, he is talking about our sense of worth and self-esteem. He’s talking about the place at the table that Alexander the Great wanted, and that even the disciples argued about among themselves. He’s talking about the place at the table we all want: earthly status and an immortal reputation. But the case could be made that all of us, even Alexander the Great, set our sights too low. What Jesus was really alluding to was not a place at any earthly table, but at God’s table: heavenly status, eternal life, and a sense of worth that derives not from an overheated ego, but from hearing and receiving the gracious call of God. Any time Jesus mentioned a table or a banquet or a meal, you can bank on the reference being symbolic of the kingdom of God, heaven, the glorious company of the saints in light. So this parable, hinging on the desired place at the master’s table, invites us to imagine heaven just like this: a family gathered for a meal in their home around their table. How can you join them? You can’t buy a seat, any more than the love-struck artist could woo back his girlfriend. You can’t earn a seat, any more than the servant could presume to sit down. All you can do is hope that Love invites you in. I think of George Herbert, the 17th century Anglican divine whose poem speaks of God’s utterly gracious invitation to be seated at his table:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack,
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything …
“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”
So I did sit and eat.

Love bids us welcome. You must sit down, says Love. But the Good News is bad news for the servant: only love will bid him welcome. None of his works have any currency in God’s economy. They cannot succeed in creating love. Is that where it ends, then, for the servant: forever waiting on the table but never sitting down to eat? Yes, that is where it ends if he insists
on trying to gain entrance the old-fashioned way. But that is not where it ends with God if he hears the word of grace. In today’s Epistle from 2nd Timothy (1:1-14), Paul implies that the faith we need is simply to trust that Love has been bidding us welcome all along: 

*This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.* Imagine, we are free to sit down at the banquet and enjoy the presence of God. “Yes, yes,” you say, “I’ve heard that sort of thing before; I’m just not sure I believe it. I need more faith, I suppose.” Guess who else thought the same thing. The Apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Most of us hear the familiar “faith the size of a mustard seed” verse, and we conclude that Jesus must think we have virtually no faith at all. What we need to do is work to increase it to the size of a mustard seed. If we were to achieve more faith, bigger faith, better faith, we could trust that God really is setting a place for us at his table. So let’s work on increasing our faith. But the parable, which Jesus offered as a corrective to the disciples’ presumptuous demand, suggests that more work is not the answer. So I don’t think Jesus meant to give us yet another testosterone-laden method of storming the gates of heaven. Consider this: perhaps Jesus meant that we should *decrease* our faith to the size of a mustard seed. It could be that he meant we have too much of the wrong faith: too much faith in ourselves to unravel life’s Gordian knots when perhaps we should rest content with them as reminders of our humility. Perhaps Gordius had the right idea all along: living with the Gordian Knot so as never to lose sight of his humble beginnings. So instead of increasing our faith, how about decreasing it to the size of a mustard seed, or the size of a child seated at the master’s table? Jesus said, *Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall never enter it* (Mark 10:15).

If you want a picture of the small-enough type of faith Jesus is talking about, simply imagine the master’s children at the family table. They never question that they have a place there; they simply have a sense of belonging. They have a small-enough faith. In his letter to the Galatians (4:5-6), Paul writes that through Christ, we have become those children; we have received adoption as the master’s children. *And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.*

Let me give you another picture of the decreased faith that can hear Love’s bidding us welcome. At the beginning of the sermon I told you about Alexander the Great, whose oversized ego sliced through the Gordian Knot and ruled the world. Another larger than life world leader who rode through history was Charlemagne, King of the Franks and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Charlemagne was born in the year 742, and by 800 he was the undisputed ruler of western civilization. His kingdom included much of what we know as modern-day Europe. By the time of his death in 814 he was easily the most powerful, most widely known person on earth, and he knew it.

Legend has it that Charlemagne himself had left detailed instructions for his own funeral, including building and endowing Aachen Cathedral, where the service and burial were to be held. His vault was paved with gold coins, and large enough for his embalmed body to be seated upon his throne, clad in imperial purple. But when the funeral procession reached the cathedral, the local bishop barred the doors. “Who comes?” the bishop asked, as was his custom. “Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire,” proclaimed the herald. “Him I know not,” the bishop replied. “Who comes?” The herald wasn’t sure what to say; this wasn’t part of the plan, so he responded, “Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth.” “Him I know not,” the bishop replied again. “Who comes?” The herald, now totally confused, responded, “Charles, a lowly sinner who begs the gift of Christ.” At that the bishop opened the doors and said, “Enter! Receive Christ’s gift of life!”
So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘we are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’ And having such humble faith, we will have ears to hear Love’s bidding us welcome: “Enter! Receive Christ’s gift of life!” You must sit down and eat.

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