

## The Parable of the Serving Master<sup>1</sup>

Let's go immediately to our study sheets and have a look at the three stanzas of this neat little parable. To understand how intelligently this has been put together, imagine making a sandwich. First you get your bread slices. Think of the first stanza as two pieces of bread. By this I mean that having your waist girded—which means wearing a belt or cord around your waist to cinch up your clothing—having your waist girded and having lamps burning are two expressions that signify that the servants are ready for something.

Now, you put two pieces of bread together and they don't make a sandwich. So you open them up and put something in between them. Let's say you get a couple of slices of cheese and you lay the cheese on each slice. Then you close the sandwich. What do you have? You have a slice of bread, a slice of cheese, a second slice of cheese and a second slice of bread. Look at the phrases in stanza 2, which, by the way more accurately reflects the original way that the author expressed this story. The first phrase is about expecting the master. That's like the top piece of bread—the alert, prepared slaves. Then we have a new element, the element of a master who is in attendance at a wedding banquet. Of course, the master is at

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on August 8, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

the banquet—he's the master. It's the most important event in the village and he's invited. The text reads that the master withdraws, breaks away from the party, and return to his estate. So, that's like the first slice of cheese. The next element continues the activities of the Master. He comes and knocks. Now, why the master knocks is a mystery. He's the master. He owns the land as far as the eye can see. He has dozens of people in his service. Usually, in the New Testament knocking on a door is accompanied by calling out. "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice..." We understand this intuitively. Knock, knock! "Hey, it's me Doug, anyone home?"

In this story, there's only knocking. We'd be on the right track if we imagined a little knock. Calling out loudly enough to be heard through the door is too bombastic. The master slips out of the party just when the band is striking up "Proud Mary" and the guests are moving to the dance floor. By the time he reaches home, you can only faintly hear, "Rollin...rollin...rollin on a river," in the background. And the master taps on the door gently with his middle knuckle.

Good thing the slaves are up with their lamps lit and work clothes still tied up the way slaves cinched up their old clothes to keep them from dragging when they stooped to work. So the slaves are alert enough to catch the barely audible

tapping on the door. They open it immediately and greet their master.

So, stanza two begins with alert slaves—the bread. It moves to two pieces of cheese—the Master slipping out of the banquet and knocking on his own door. And then we return to the alert slaves who manage to hear the knock and open the door.

Now, to the third stanza. We've got a two slice cheese sandwich that needs something so we open it up again. We have two pieces of bread with a slice of cheese on each. Now we want to put in the meat—a nice slice of ham. It's not kosher, but this sandwich is only for illustrative purposes and this is the south. So ham it is. Now let's look at our sandwich. We go back to our at-the-ready slaves. They are the bread. Stanza three starts with the slaves. Now we move to the upper cheese slice—the arriving master.

Now comes the centerpiece. This is the most important part of the sandwich—the ham. What do we read. It's a pretty big surprise. The master becomes like a servant. He cinches up his robe with a cord. And what makes that noteworthy is that he has just come from the wedding bash and is decked out on his wedding bash finery. Imagine a lady in a grand gown, pulling up the dress off the floor and tying it in a big overhand knot, kicking off her high heels and wading through calf high mud to help

someone. That's the image here. The Master is cinching up his finery to get the slaves' dinner ready.

The text says he causes them to recline. Remember from our trips over to the Explorations in Antiquity Museum when we learned about the *triclinium* the three sided low table that diners would lay around or recline around? What the master is doing is getting the slaves to take up the role of honored guests. And he is doing the serving. He could be dancing with the mother of the bride or smoking cigars with the groomsmen. But he has stolen away to have this special time with the slaves—the ones who occupied the bottom position in his own household.

Now, as I talk I'm thinking that something beautiful is emerging. Aren't we getting a glimpse at the deep mystery and glory of what it means to be a Christian? If you and I can be alert enough and expectant enough, does not that readiness put us in a position to quietly meet our Lord and be deeply blessed by him.

I'm struck by a couple of things in the life of Theresa of Avila that illustrate this parable. Theresa was born in Spain in the early 1500's—in the days of the Spanish Inquisition and encroachment by Islam. She became a Carmelite nun and then fell profoundly ill, a condition that necessitated her return home to

recuperate. Following what seemed like a miraculous recovery; Theresa actually became less spiritual, less focused, and overly busy. She'd maintain her daily convent discipline of doing her daily devotions, but she was easily distracted, fell asleep, or was simply bored with the exercise. This mediocrity in prayer continued for no less than 18 years. There was another factor that kept Theresa from having much of a spiritual life. It was the laxness and ignorance of the Christians around her. There were priests who discouraged her prayer life and the convent school that she attended was focused on superficial spiritual practices instead of inward devotion. Then something began to happen in Theresa's life. She began to have waves of moving encounters with God. Theresa is best known for her ecstatic moments of feeling ravished by God's love. But the part of her life that I find so interesting is that Theresa was really quite ordinary in her prayer life for many years. Her secret, she simply stuck with it. It's as if she kept the lamp lit and her waist girded.

When we finally understand how marvelously this text is put together, we see that it holds up a powerful mystery—the mystery of Jesus Christ, the human being of God, coming to those who wait for him. The image of the slaves late at night waiting alertly is a powerful image of true discipleship. It is to such

that Christ steals away to be with. These are the ones who are served by him. And they can be you and me. Think of the simple act of going to church. Isn't attending church fundamentally an act of keeping the lamp lit. Isn't it continuing to be alert when the rest of the world is too busy with whatever? I could say the same thing about continuing to pray, continuing to read, continuing to try to detect Christ's calling and his work in the midst of our ordinary lives. Keep the lamp lit. Stay awake. And to us as well will come the quiet knock and the presence of the Master.