

Ready to Serve

1 Samuel 3: 10-19 Luke 12: 35-40

In popular culinary parlance, “ready to serve” means that someone else has done most, if not all, of the work in putting together your dish or meal. Who doesn’t enjoy going to the supermarket and getting a rotisserie chicken hot out of *their* oven to take home along with a side or two? The meal is ready to serve in minutes and you didn’t break any sweat doing it. Even the “kitchen help” (i.e. spouses and children) is glad because they don’t have much to clean up. Everyone’s happy and fed, and you can kick back and enjoy the rest of the evening.

Since there is no potluck this Sunday and merely talking about this has gotten the hungry juices flowing, so let’s leave it there.

The only thing better would be to have the home person – if you have one – make the meal for you. In my house, the home person would be me. However, the queen of the kitchen doesn’t like what I would prepare, or doesn’t trust that I could put it together, or follow her precise instructions, and insists therefore that she must rule the kitchen as an autocrat. I dutifully do my job, submitting to her authority and leaving it all up to her. That’s the way she wants it. Bear in mind, this doesn’t prevent her from complaining that, after a hard day’s work, she also has to concern herself about dinner and I have done nothing helpful. ‘Hey, I’m doing my job as you’ve prescribed it. Obey instructions. No instructions, then do nothing.’

If you take the expression “ready to serve” out of the culinary context and use it in the faith and biblical context, it refers to preparedness to serve. Unlike in the meal prep, it isn’t the case that someone else has done all the work for you. You can’t pick up this kind of ready-to-serve at the store. No one can do the work for you. Yes, it is the work of preparation that the faithful are responsible for fulfilling.

While we talk about how ready God is to give in surprising measure to the faithful, in particular those who are acting faithfully in working for the Kingdom of God, the other side of the exchange concerns how ready we are to serve the one who we easily profess to be “Lord” of God’s Kingdom. We like the giving; we’re adept at the taking. It’s the serving part that can get a bit sticky, failing to prompt our inspired action. Yet the giving, and hence the taking, are all predicated on our faithful activity to advance the Kingdom by our work as servants. But if we aren’t ready to serve, then there isn’t much happening to us, through us, or for us.

I push the men in my prison class to continually seek out and probe beyond their leading edge, to push beyond their comfort zone and into areas unfamiliar or even unexplored. I urge them to be discoverers, initiators who set themselves into challenging journeys. If any of us don’t push those boundaries, seeking to expand our horizons, then the world becomes a smaller and smaller place, and we become smaller and smaller people with smaller and smaller vision for what God can do. This is particularly problematic in the prison environment and culture.

We who are free can nonetheless build a prison for ourselves in safe routines, certain in what we know, feeling that there is nothing more worth learning, knowing, pursuing, or experiencing that we haven't already learned or experienced. And our world gets smaller, our lives grow smaller. It's a death trap.

Further, it cuts us off from the fullness of life that God has provided. Rather than growing our lives into the fullness of its promise, we can compact our lives into miserable little boxes of comfort, convenience, and complacency until they carry us off to the destiny that we've created for ourselves. God has us growing in every season, young, old, and in-between. God has us growing so that we're ready to serve.

You may not like the terms and conditions of where God has provided for your service. Ask an inmate trying to make a meaningful life in prison as they live out their life sentence. It isn't what they would prefer, however that is the place where God has set them. And simply because the place is nasty and miserable, God's promise has not gone away, and neither has the expectation that they should be ready to serve the way of the Kingdom.

In our first scripture reading from First Samuel 3, we re-connect with the story of young Samuel who has been set into the nasty situation in the Temple at Shiloh where he had been pledged by his mother in a deal with God. At the Temple, he is under the tutelage of the old priest Eli, and has the company of Eli's two despicable sons Phinehas and Hophni who steal whatever they haven't extorted from the people and have sex with any woman they could find.

Eli is a rather useless figure. He knows his sons are corrupt, cruel, and rotten to the core, but he refuses to do anything about them. In chapter two, a "man of God" – a prophet of some sort – comes to Eli and challenges him, saying among other things: *Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?* Eli doesn't have an answer, and gets told that he and his sons will all die for their sinful failures and lack of repentance.

Throughout all of this, we learn from the scripture: *And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people.*

We have the story of the Lord calling Samuel at night – a threefold occurrence – which has the boy Samuel asking Eli what he wanted several times. Finally, the old priest told him that God was calling out to him and to speak with God.

God gave Samuel a vision of the future which did not bode well for Eli and his scoundrel sons. When asked by Eli, Samuel dutifully recounted the dire vision.

To end this passage, we hear: *The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.*

Somehow, amid this totally dysfunctional environment at the Temple of Shiloh, young Samuel kept himself differentiated from the corrupt and faithless behavior of those around him and in leadership. He managed to stay above it all, perhaps the only one reflecting the light of God at the Temple of Shiloh. He managed to prepare himself, possibly growing his capacity for discernment in that challenging environment. Samuel is not the subject of great stories like David or Elijah, but his leadership at a critical time in the nation's development mark him as the one of the most faithful, wise, and courageous leaders in the history of Israel and Judah.

We learn from the story of Samuel's youth and development in the Temple of Shiloh. We discover that the one who seeks to be faithful to God, who bears a servant spirit for the Lord, can overcome the obstacles and challenges of a corrupt situation. Further that faithful one can leverage the problems encountered into real life learning that teaches and guides, even if the characters around someone like Samuel hardly provide models for behavior.

The need for preparedness, a process which should be continually engaged, is the subject of Jesus' lesson in Luke 12. He talks about the servant awaiting the return of the master from a wedding banquet. This is all about the coming of the end of the age and the messianic banquet that marks that time. At the banquet, those righteous and faithful to the Kingdom are hosted by God to finest of wine and delight of rich foods. It's even better than Fairfield Presbyterian Pot Luck; yes, it's that good! With those references in his story, the listeners immediately know that Jesus is talking about the end of the age when God reigns over creation and the blessed are seated at the messianic banquet.

Jesus tells how the servants keep their lamps burning, ready to open the door for the master the moment the master knocks. These are the good and faithful servants of the Kingdom who have not gone asleep, who have not left the door unattended, who remain vigilant in expectation of the master's return.

Then Jesus says something quite shocking about what the master will do when he returns. *Truly I tell you, [the master] will dress himself to serve, will have **them** recline at the table and will come and wait on them.* This kind of reversal is a Kingdom insight. It refers back to the messianic banquet. At that time, the servants come to dine as **the Lord is the host of the banquet**, serving them the finest foods and wines. The servants will recline as the Lord provides for them as honored guests who have faithfully served the Kingdom and remained vigilant through all circumstances.

Then Jesus switches gears, moving away from the story of the servants and the master and the banquet.

Jesus now talks about the householder who suffers a thief breaking in. The matter concerns knowing the hour, and in the context of the end of the age and the coming kingdom, it is a teaching regarding concerns about knowing the hour. In the time of Jesus and at the time of the writing of the gospels several generations later, and even among some today, there is great speculation about the day and time when the end

of the age will come. With this saying, Jesus pretty much throws a bucket of water on such matters.

If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.

The servant does not know what hour the master will arrive, and for the faithful servant, it doesn't matter – they intend to remain faithful, determined in the service to advance the Kingdom. The householder does not know the hour when the thief is coming because, if he did, he would have prepared for the thief's arrival. But the wise householder has prepared for *any* time a thief might come, hiding their most valuable items, and putting into safekeeping anything else of consequential value. The moron householder, or I suppose better – the *faithless* householder who doesn't believe or expect anything will ever be any different – leaves the door open, cash and keys on the counter, and leaves out a hand truck so they can cart off the big screen TV.

The teaching for us is that we are called to be faithful and vigilant, pushing ourselves along as servants of the Kingdom, having faith in the promises of the Lord. We are not to remain idle and stagnant, watching our world and our view of it shrink into pitiful, despairing oblivion. We know we're in trouble if we feel sufficient in all ways unto ourselves, as if there is no God or Kingdom that matters in our life, that calls us to stretch ourselves and to serve faithfully in all ways. Let us not act as if we were the moron householder who never expected anything different to happen in their life. Faithful to the promise of God, may we always be ready to serve.