

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SERVANTS AT THE TABLE OF THE LORD”

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 53: 1-12

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling on Sunday, October 5, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Isaiah 53: 1-12

1 Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
2 For he grew up before him like a young plant
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity,
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
4 Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter

and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.
9 They made his grave with the wicked
and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.
10 Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with affliction.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the LORD shall prosper.
11 Out of his anguish he shall see;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out himself to death
and was numbered with the transgressors,
yet he bore the sin of many
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Servants at the Table of the Lord

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Upon hearing David Hay's voicemail a few years ago, I liked it so much that I decided to use a variation of it for myself. It basically says, "I'm unavailable to take your call right now, but, like the tide, I'll be back in a little bit." Without exception, the tide always goes out, and it always returns. No one commands it, no one negotiates with it—we simply learn to live by it, and at some level, our life of faith is like that.

When Job asked God for an explanation for why things were the way they were, God responded, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements?" To be certain, we are by no means the masters of the tides. We are not in control, and God wants us to understand that.

Not surprisingly, Jesus begins today's reading by bearing witness to the limitations of the human condition, the frailty of the human condition: "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come." In fact, even when we know God and love God, we're still going to sin, and woe to that person who would cause one of God's little ones to stumble.

Now, when sin does come, and when it happens that someone sins against us, and when we might be inclined to hold a grudge and withhold forgiveness, Jesus tells us, "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive."

Perhaps you saw Erika Kirk speak at her husband Charlie Kirk's funeral. She said many important things, but one of the most striking was about the man who killed her husband. She said, "That young man, I forgive him." My friend and colleague Anthony Thompson also came to my mind—his words in the courtroom, shortly after his wife had been shot and killed at Emanuel AME Church, were similarly filled with forgiveness. In both of those cases, repentance was not part of the equation, and yet here in Luke 17, Jesus clearly associates repentance with forgiveness, which raises the question: can we forgive people who are not repentant?

I was following a group Facebook thread recently where that very question came up, and one person insisted, "You can't have forgiveness without repentance." I understand that argument. Scripture tells us that John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus did the same. Later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus opens the people's minds to understand the Scriptures so that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations. And we also know that when it comes to salvation, none of us were aware that we were dead in our sins until God quickened our hearts and opened our eyes.

So the conclusion I have come to is this: repentance should be present when forgiveness is offered, but sometimes it's not. Sometimes the people to whom we offer forgiveness are not repentant at all. Sometimes they know not what they do.

When Jesus talks about forgiveness, it overwhelms the disciples. To forgive again and again seems impossible. "If the same person sins against you seven times a day," Jesus says, "and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." Sensing the weight of that command, the disciples cry out, "Increase our faith!"

Jesus reminds them, and us, that it is not the size of our faith that matters, but the object of our faith. Even faith as small as a mustard seed, when rooted and grounded in God, can bear the fruit of true and lasting forgiveness. And when Jesus speaks of uprooting the mulberry tree, known for its deep and expansive roots, we are reminded that even deeply rooted resentment, long-held grudges, and stubborn hindrances can be uprooted in Christ.

Jesus then shares a parable about a servant—a slave, more accurately—who has worked all day in the field. When the servant returns home, he does not sit at the table expecting to be served. Instead, he girds himself and prepares supper, and afterward he does not boast of his worth. He simply says, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done." When we consider this parable within the arc of

today's reading, we see a clear movement: a warning about sin, a call to forgiveness and faith, and now a summons to humility. And why humility? Because we have done nothing to deserve the grace of our master.

The suffering servant, Jesus Christ, is the one who was despised and rejected, wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the punishment that made us whole.

Today is World Communion Sunday, and Christians around the world gather at the Master's table. Presbyterians in Charleston, Baptists in Nigeria, Catholics in Brazil, Orthodox believers in Greece, underground Christians in China—all gather in grand cathedrals and simple homes alike. They present bread and wine, wafers and juice, using vessels ranging from silver flagons to chipped pottery. Wherever the church is found this day, she kneels in spirit at the Lord's table, not with prestige or accomplishment, and certainly not with the assumption that she is in charge. At this table, the church proclaims what the servants proclaimed: "We have done only what we ought to have done."

Rarely do we celebrate baptism on the same Sunday as the Lord's Supper, but today we do. What a powerful reminder that Charlotte is not her own, and neither are we. In body and soul, in life and in death, we belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. Baptism reminds us that grace cannot be earned or deserved. The water is poured out not because of merit, but because of grace.

Shary reminded us during the Minute for Mission that today also marks the beginning of our Stewardship Season. Stewardship is using all that we are—our hands, our feet, our talents, our treasure—in service to God. We come into this sacred place from the fields of our lives, and while we might want to sit back and be entertained, that is not what worship is. We come because it is what we ought to do. This is not our table; it is God's table. And the gifts we bring, the full measure of our lives offered in service, are acts of humble obedience and joyful response to God's blessings.

We have been blessed to be a blessing, to bear witness to a life yielded to God. That truth is especially important on World Communion Sunday, because the church is the living exhibition of God's kingdom to the world. We are a witness to the rising tide of God's grace, the fullness of which is inevitable.

To be faithful, to forgive, to live as Christ's church is not always easy. Like the disciples, we know our weakness and frailty, and so we cry out, "Increase our faith!" A good sign that faith is growing is that we begin to look more like servants, recognizing that we are not in control and not the authors of salvation. God made this table possible. God is the one who, in Jesus Christ, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, coming not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

God's love for us and for the world is like a rising tide—unstoppable and unnegotiable. We cannot control it, but we can learn to live within it and be shaped by it. Faith, forgiveness, servanthood, stewardship, and baptism are the rhythms of God's kingdom. Having received grace upon grace, there is only one posture fitting for us: the posture of servants at the table of the Lord, servants who have been set free to love.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.