

The Servant In The Barn by Jeff Strite

Matthew 20:20-20:28

OPEN: There's a story about church whose Sunday School decided to allow the children to stage their own impromptu Christmas pageant. The teachers read the story and provided some props; then they just stood off to the side and let the kids dramatize it on their own.

One girl grabbed the doll and said, "I'll be Mary."

Another said, "I'll be Joseph,"

Some scampered for the bathrobes and said, "I'll be a shepherd."

Everyone was either a lamb, or a wise man, or an angel or something else.

But one little girl had no part, so she said, "I'll be the doctor who delivered the baby Jesus."

They all took their places.

Mary had a sofa pillow with a baby doll tucked under her shirt and Joseph led her to the inn where they were rejected. When the time came, the "doctor" took the doll from Mary's pillow and held it up.

Joseph, wanting to act like a new papa said, "What is it, doc?"

And the little doctor smiled and said, "Why it's a...God."

(David O. Dykes, sermoncentral.com)

APPLY: Jesus was God in the flesh. He was born into this world in a human body but He'd always been God. Before His virgin birth, He'd sat in majesty in heaven. He could call upon 1000s upon 1000s of angels to do His bidding. And – with just a word – He could change the course of mighty rivers or crush the power of huge nations.

Here was Jesus – God in the flesh – born in a Jewish town called Bethlehem.

Now, Bethlehem wasn't a big community. In fact, according to one source:

"At the beginning of the first century AD, Bethlehem was a village with not more than a thousand inhabitants: a small set of houses scattered along the side of a ridge and protected by a wall that was in a bad state of repair, or even mostly demolished, since it had been built nearly a thousand years earlier"

(<http://www.josemariaescriva.info/article/first-journey-bethlehem-basilica-of-the-nativity-holy-land>)

So, Jesus was born in a poor backwater Jewish town.

And He was born in a barn to boot.

Have you ever been in a barn?

The ones I've been in have not been the cleanest places.

There's often cobwebs all over the place And the smell is musty and dank and... well, they smell of manure. It's a barn... that's what barns are like.

People don't live in barns. So folks don't always clean them out.

So, Jesus is born in a barn... and placed in a feeding trough – a place where cattle ate.

Jesus - the God of all creation, the God who had had the ability to mobilize all of heaven with just a word, the Jesus who had walked on streets of gold and passed through gates of pearl. THIS Jesus the God of the universe - was born in a barn filled with farm animals and all their smells.

Now, I'm stressing all this so you'll better understand our text this morning. The central focus of that passage is where Jesus tells His disciples "...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did NOT come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:26-28

Jesus came to be our servant.

And He calls us to be just like Him.

To be a servant of others... just like He was for us.

But how do I do that? How can I become a servant to others like Jesus was for me?

As I studied this text and thought about the Christmas season, three things occurred to me.

1st – if we're going to become a servant like Jesus, we've got to be willing to a little get dirty.

Being born in a barn is a pretty dirty place to be.

They're not sterile, they're not a good place for a baby to be born.

Just think about it: when was the last time you were at a OB ward and saw a few bales of hay sitting around? Or saw a sheep or goat in the halls of the hospital?

A barn is a dirty place to give birth to give birth to a child.

One man made this observation:

The birthing process was messy.

Barns that housed animals were pretty messy, too.

Kind of like our lives.

(Rick Brown, Heartlight.org, 12/20/11)

Jesus came to earth to get dirty.

Not only was He born in a dirty stable and placed in a dirty manger, during His ministry He spent His time with dirty people. People no one else would touch.

The lame, the sick, the Lepers, a woman unclean because of an issue of blood. Then there were the prostitutes, the tax collectors, and the all around general "sinners".

And, of course, Jesus got dirtiest on the cross. That's where He bore our stains, our filth and our dirt.

Jesus came to get dirty.

And He calls us to get dirty too.

ILLUS: I read the story of a man was visiting a home for the retarded. For an hour or so he talked with a young woman named Mary (a girl whose body was covered with tumors). As the conversation wound to a close, he put his arm around her and said "you really are a beautiful person."

"Thank you," she replied. "No one has ever gotten close enough to notice."

Jesus called us to "get close" to people whose lives aren't pretty, whose lives are a mess. To touch folks where they hurt and even help them clean up.

ILLUS: Joe (one of the men in our congregation) understands this. He invites people to church who have had drug problems. He's invited the homeless. He understands the value of reaching out to people who others might reject or ignore.

Many people would prefer to invite doctors and lawyers to church (and nothing wrong with that). But they do so because they see those people as being "cleaner" and more acceptable. But Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

ILLUS: I had an interesting conversation with Gene and Bev (two other members of the church) this week back in the food pantry. They talked about how they knew they were probably giving food out to people who were scamming the system. They were sure some folks were taking the food and selling it to others and then using the money to buy other things.

And during the course of the conversation, we all agreed: that's not our problem. Gene and Bev try really hard to screen out abusers of the system, but they're not going to lose any sleep over those who fool them. That's God's problem.

It could be that some of the folks we help that just MIGHT be manipulators.

But that's God's problem. We're called to be faithful in this ministry and the ones who

abuse the system actually need Jesus as much (or more) than anyone else. It's our prayer that God will use the food pantry to reach into their lives... and remove their dirt too.

Jesus came to get dirty... and He calls us to do the same.

2nd – If we're going to be servants like Jesus, we've got to be willing to be ignored or offended.

It's part of the deal.

Jesus told us: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." John 15:18

Do you know how many people showed up at the manger when Jesus was born?

Me neither.

The Bible doesn't tell us.

It might have been as few as 3 or more than 20 or 30 shepherds.

But would be about it. Nobody else came.

Even the Wise Men didn't even show up until about 2 years later.

AND when the Wise Men did arrive and alerted all of Jerusalem that the new King of the Jews was to be born in Bethlehem... nobody went to there to worship Him.

Everybody stayed home.

As John's gospel said: "(Jesus) came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." John 1:11

When Jesus came to earth... He didn't come to receive praise and honor.

He came to minister.

Philippians tells us that even though Jesus was "...in very nature God, (He) did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!" Philippians 2:6-8

All through His life, Jesus faced the ridicule and insults of people of prominence. The Pharisees, teachers of the Law and the Chief Priests all sought to embarrass Him, and undermine Him, and destroy Him.

At one point in His ministry "... many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." John 6:66

And when He was arrested and put on trial, Pilate tried to get the crowds to release Jesus and crucify Barabbas.

"What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them.

"Crucify him!" they shouted.

"Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Mark 15:12-14

You know, it's a little hard to be nice to folks who treat you like that.

But as Jesus was on the cross, one of final statements was: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34

When Jesus came, He was rejected and abused. And one of the failings of many Christians is the failure to grasp this truth. Christians are not all that fond of not being liked or appreciated.

They don't realize that this world isn't going to accept them. And that they will be abused both in the world and even in the church. And you do know what happens when Christians face that kind of response.

Have you ever seen an angry Christian?

Do you know how they respond to being mistreated like that?

They quit. They walk away.

"I don't need this." They'll say.

Recently I read the following article that addressed that issue:

ILLUS: "I am a soldier in the army of my God. Jesus is my commanding officer.

The Bible is my code of conduct.

I am a volunteer in this army, and I am enlisted for eternity.

I will either retire in this army at the Lord's return or die in this army, but I will not get out, be talked out, or pushed out. I am a soldier.

I am a soldier, not a baby. I don't need to be pampered, petted, pumped up, picked up. I am a soldier.

No one has to call me, remind me, write me, visit me, entice me, or lure me. I am a soldier.

No one has to send me flowers, gifts, food, cards, candy, or give me handouts. I am a soldier.

I do not need to be cuddled, cradled, cared for, or catered to. I am committed. I am a soldier.

I cannot have my feeling hurt bad enough to turn me around.

I cannot be discouraged enough to turn me aside.

I cannot lose enough to cause me to quit. I am a soldier.

When Jesus called me into this army, I had nothing.
If I end up with nothing, I will still come out ahead. I will win!
I am a soldier of Christ.”

The point of that illustration is that – when I became a Christian – I surrendered to Jesus. I signed on to belong to Him and serve Him no matter what. And I will serve Him... even when others might mistreat, misuse or ignore me.

Why?

Because I am a servant of the most High God.

That’s the highest honor anyone can be given, and only a fool would walk away from it.
We are called to be His servant, and to serve those who often will reject us.

So, the first way I need to learn to be a servant of Jesus is to be willing to get dirty
The 2nd I need to learn is that I must be willing to be ignored or offended, and still serve others in His name.

BUT, the most important thing I need to learn if I want to be a servant like Jesus is that my primary goal is to save people from Hell.

A lot of people believe their main objective as Christians is to be “nice” people.

Should we be “nice” people?

Of course we should. The world around us needs to know that Jesus has changed us so that we are more pleasant to be around than we would be otherwise. But that’s not our primary purpose in life.

ILLUS: Do you remember the “Andy Griffith Show”? That was a show about “nice” people... but Jesus was NEVER mentioned on the show. They’d show people going to church, but the name of Jesus was not allowed – their purpose was not to show us Christians, but show us “nice” people.

And there are Christians who think that should be their main purpose.

By contrast, Jesus said: “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

Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

That was His prime directive. That was His main focus

And so, do you suppose that should be ours as well? Of course it should.

ILLUS: About 12 years ago Barna Research took a poll of Americas and found that

- Only 37% of adults thought the birth of Jesus is the most important aspect of Christmas.
- 44% of the respondents said family time is the most important part of the season.
- 3% said presents or parties were the most important part of Christmas.
- Another 3% said the best thing about Christmas was getting a paid holiday.

What that means is that we have our work cut out for us.

Not everybody understands that Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

Many folks are more into parties and family time... and paid vacations

How many of you have heard about what some have called the “war on Christmas”?

There are many businesses and groups out there who shy away from mention saying

“Merry Christmas because they’re of offending people. And frankly... that offends me.

ILLUS: I recently saw a commercial for a bank where they wished everyone “Happy Holidays” and then went on to mention the holidays they had in mind. They mentioned:

- Thanksgiving
- Hanukah
- Peace on Earth
- And Happy New Year

Now, I know what Thanksgiving is. And I have a pretty good idea what Hanukah and New Year’s is all about... but has anybody ever heard of a holiday called “Peace On Earth?”

Me neither.

You know why? Because there is no such thing.

But this bank wanted to avoid saying “Merry Christmas”.

So, yes, there is a “war on Christmas.” There is a consistent attempt to take Christ out of Christmas because people are offended by Jesus.

But here’s the deal... we live in a secular world. And the secular world will ALWAYS be at war with Christmas, and with anything else that talks about Jesus.

That will never stop!

We must remember that we live in a dirty, sin-filled world. And that world is not going to get excited about us talking about Jesus.

But that’s not really the main problem.

The main problem is that there are many people who proudly and loudly say “Merry Christmas” but who are going to go to hell. They may have Christ in their Christmas, but

they don't have Him in their lives.

That's why we need realize we're not going to get Christ in Christmas until we get Christ into the lives and hearts of the people around us.

And that's why we have special events like our Christmas service on the 22nd and our Christmas Eve service on the 24th. We want to get people interested in coming and hearing about Jesus. Not just the baby Jesus in the manger, but also the one who died on the cross.

(Talk about invitation cards for audience to hand out to their friends and neighbors)

Now my final point is this. We serve a Jesus who got dirty. A Jesus who was unappreciated and ignored and a Jesus whose main message is often rejected and misunderstood. And the ONLY way folks around us are going to see Jesus is if we are willing to get dirty and be unappreciated and misunderstood.

The world around us needs to see us reflect the Jesus that we belong to. And the most powerful way of doing that is to become a servant of others as He was for us.

Max Lucado had an interesting observation in his book "God Came Near":

"When God chose to reveal Himself to mankind, what medium did He use?

A book? No, that was secondary.

A church? No, that was consequential.

A moral code? No, to limit God's revelation to a cold list of do's and don'ts is as tragic as looking at a Colorado roadmap and saying that you'd seen the Rockies.

When God chose to reveal himself, he did so through a human body.

The tongue that called forth the dead was a human one.

The hand that touched the leper had dirt under its nails.

The feet upon which the woman wept were callused and dirty.

And his tears... oh, don't miss the tears. They came from a heart as broken as your or mine has ever been.

So, people came to him. My, how they came to him!

They came at night; they touched him as he walked down the street, they followed him around the sea; they invited him into their homes, and placed their children at his feet.

Why? Because he refused to be a statue in a cathedral or a priest in an elevated pulpit.

He chose instead to be Jesus.

There were those who mocked him, who were envious of him, who misunderstood him

and there were those who revered him. But there was not one person who considered him too holy, too divine, or too celestial to touch. There was not one person who was reluctant to approach him for fear of being rejected.

REMEMBER THAT.

Remember that when you see the nativity scene with a helpless infant drawing shepherd and wise man, manger beast and celestial angel, all in an unthreatening atmosphere that was to mark his entire life, even when that life was eventually slain on a desolate hill in Judea. Remember. For man seems always to build barriers between himself and God, but Jesus builds bridges.”

That is our Savior.

And that is the example we are to follow.

We are to be a people who build bridges between our relatives, friends and neighbors – and God.