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“We are unprofitable servants: we have done what we were obliged to do” (Luke 17:10).

Titus 2:1-8, 11-14; Luke 17:7-10

Today’s readings give us an interesting window into the early church at the end of the first century. The Letter to Titus shows family patterns following traditional norms and Luke’s Gospel describes communities facing leadership issues as expectation of Jesus’ imminent return cooled and the church settled in for the long haul. This later window contrasts with the more radical nature of the first generation of disciples acting on Jesus’ inspiration.

Titus was likely a disciple of St. Paul, but the Letter is clearly a post-Pauline work and part of the Pastoral Epistles written after Paul’s death to reflect his theology. It presents ideal profiles of church communities with gender roles and male-dominant families retreating from more prominent and co-equal roles for women during Jesus’ ministry and disruption within families foretold by Jesus because of the radical nature of his teachings.

Jesus offered a discipleship replacing family bonds, advocating new values that challenged the status quo, new freedoms defying social norms and new ideas about God and religion that threatened tradition. The Beatitudes described followers witnessing a revolutionary way of life that shocked their contemporaries and brought scrutiny, expulsion and persecution by those in authority.

The New Testament reveals a transition from the “dangerous memory” of Jesus’ radical preaching that led to his execution, toward a more predictable existence in the Mediterranean world after the Jewish-Roman war and the destruction of Israel. Making Christianity more acceptable and survivable in the Greco-Roman world is one goal especially evident in the Acts of Apostles and Pastoral Letters. It was not an easy or immediate path, but one that led to the church becoming the official religion of the empire under Constantine.

Today’s Gospel oddly presents Jesus as a master who insists on being served by workers coming in from the fields. This contradicts everything Jesus said about himself as a servant, but it makes sense as a lesson based on Jesus’ teaching about service later applied to pastors in Luke’s church expecting others to wait on them. Leaders in these some communities needed to be reminded that they were servants, and unprofitable ones at that for just doing what they had been called to do.

For us, a more layered reading the New Testament brings the real history of the church closer to us. We face the same problems, struggles and adjustments happening in the first century. We feel the same impulse to retreat from the revolution Jesus began into a lighter version, less demanding and safer. Enshrining tradition, romanticizing the past, ritualizing discipleship instead of living it, are still strategies for avoiding ongoing radical conversion and the hard work of service needed to be the church in today’s world. Jesus never stops inviting us to know him, love him and live our lives as fully as he lived his.

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