

## **“The Other Side Of The Tray”**

*The Rev. S. Shane Nanney ~ December 22, 2024*

*Micah 5:2-5 and Luke 1:39-45*

Rebecca Nagy recalls the time when she was waiting tables and had a tray full of drinks and then had the misfortune of crashing into her manager, causing them both to tumble to the floor.

Nagy, however, while falling, managed to keep the drink tray she was carrying horizontal, so that even as she lay on the floor, not a drop was spilled, not a glass was broken.

It was such a spectacular performance that the customers gave her a rousing cheer and round of applause! Unfortunately, such responses are rare.

Waitresses. They're hauling heavy trays. Crashing into co-workers. Being poked and grabbed and yelled at. Having to smile and be nice to rude customers. Receiving lousy tips.

It can be a brutal way to make a buck.

An honorable profession to be sure, and some wait staff make good money. But most work hard for their money with not much more than bruises and bunions to show for the effort.

The world is divided into two kinds of people: those on the customer side of the tray, and those on the wait side of the tray.

On the customer side are the proud and the powerful; on the wait side are the humble and the harassed. Far too many customers assume that wait staff are low-class men and women without skills, beneath conversation and consideration. Too often, they are snubbed, underpaid and ignored.

Welcome to life on the other side of the tray.

It's the other side with which Mary, the mother of Jesus, was all too familiar. Along with other women of first-century Galilee, Mary was a second-class citizen, deemed not worthy of conversation or consideration. She had little or no authority, virtually no rank or status in her culture.

Now, this is not to suggest that the waitress at the Bob Evans is a second-class citizen. It is rather to put her in the same company as Mary who saw herself as a “servant of the Lord” (1:38). A servant, one who was waiting upon the Lord.

When Mary races over to the house of her relative Elizabeth, she discovers that her encounter with the angel was no mere fantasy. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and cries to Mary, “BLESSED ARE YOU AMONG WOMEN, AND BLESSED IS THE FRUIT OF YOUR WOMB” (v. 42). Elizabeth describes Mary as “THE MOTHER OF MY LORD” (v. 43), both an affirmation and confirmation of what the angel had told Mary.

In today’s passage, Elizabeth is a huge help to Mary, giving support, offering encouragement, and sharing a sense of overflowing joy. Throughout the gospel of Luke, joy emerges again and again, with the Christmas angels bringing good tidings of great joy (2:10), Jesus predicting that his followers will leap for joy (6:23), 70 disciples returning from their mission with joy (10:17), joy being felt in heaven over one sinner who repents (15:7), and the apostles returning to Jerusalem after the ascension, “with great joy” (24:52).

So, two themes begin to emerge: servanthood and joy. The one follows the other.

On this Sunday before Christmas, we are reminded that authentic Christian living requires a sense of service; it will inevitably — if done right — put us on the other side of the tray, serving people, waiting on others, ministering to the needy, lifting up the fallen.

But such a life will also bear the fruit of joy: the JOY of forgiveness, JOY of healing, JOY of mission, JOY of new life, JOY of inclusion in the family of God. So often we forget this, especially at Christmastime, when our joy is swamped by the pressure to feel happy about parties and pageants and presents under the Christmas tree. Christian joy, when you think about it, is both more simple and more significant than Christmas happiness. **Happiness** is linked to festivities, while **joy** is tied to forgiveness; **happiness** is about new things, while **joy** is about new life; **happiness** comes from finding a way to keep the peace between assorted aunts and uncles after three days of Christmas togetherness, while **joy** comes from finding our place in the family of God.

In our world of Amazon and department stores, where stuff matters so much, it is hard to distinguish between the temporary feelings of happiness we experience when we get something new and the real, abiding joy that our hearts truly long for. People buy things all the time. They think it will make them happier and content with life.

We buy things hoping they will be the answer to the problems and difficulties we face in life. We stake our hope in things that can never make us truly happy. We are drawn to the counterfeit, to things that can never fully satisfy our deep spiritual longing.

You see, our pursuit for meaning and contentment in life is valid though often the source of our pursuit is misdirected. We think the never-ending pursuit of happiness will satisfy us, but what we really hunger for is the joy and security that come from knowing and loving God and being known and loved by God. Our joy grows in proportion to the level of intimacy we share with Christ. It is a fruit of the Spirit born out of a trusting relationship with Christ.

Joy. It's what Jesus came to earth to give us, and what Elizabeth helps Mary to feel as she discovers her destiny as the mother of the Lord. Not that we should be surprised that Elizabeth is in touch with joy — after all, she is rejoicing in the child she herself is carrying in the womb, believing the child to be a gift from God.

There can certainly be joy on the other side of the tray.

After receiving Elizabeth's blessing, Mary bursts into a song of praise. "My soul magnifies the Lord," she says, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has looked with favor on the lowliness of His servant" (vv. 46-48). God could have selected a queen or a princess or an aristocratic heiress to be the mother of the Lord, but he did not.

Instead, God goes for the weary teenager doing the swing shift at the Galilee Grill, trying to make her way through life the best she can.

It's a surprising selection, but it shows God's hand — it reveals the plan for God's ongoing involvement in the world. "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation," sings Mary. "He has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (vv. 50-53).

God has "filled the hungry with good things," says Mary. It's a fascinating line that suggests the image of God as Waiter, feeding those who are hungry and clearing the table of those who are already full. If you are in need, God will help you ... he'll be with you in a minute ... but if you are self-reliant and proud and powerful, you aren't going to receive any service from the Lord.

Jesus followed this same path when he matured and began to wait on the spiritually starving people of the world. You see, we lead by serving and we serve by leading. However, there is a difference between servanthood and servitude.

- Servitude is imposed; servanthood is embraced.
- Servitude enslaves; servanthood emancipates.
- Servitude belittles; servanthood uplifts.

And there is the key to Christmas joy. The little-known secret of Christmas is that our joy is full when we study and learn from Mary as servant, God as servant, Jesus as servant, and we become servants ourselves.

When we do, our joy will be full. Amen.