

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
October 2, 2016.
Luke 17:5-10

Wow, this short reading today from Luke is a challenging one. It sounds like two distinct two sub-units put together. But if we look at them carefully, we will see they are connected in a profound way.

The first part is about faith. The disciples ask Jesus, "Increase our faith!" and there's an exclamation there.... so they really want this. More faith. Stronger faith. Deeper faith. And they want Jesus to increase their faith *for* them. I think Jesus was doing plenty to increase their faith, don't you?

Jesus responds as if faith is something they already have and if they simply trusted what they had, they would be able to do amazing things like uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea. In Mark, we hear this same admonishment - If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could move mountains. I think we all know that a mustard seed is very, very small. So Jesus is saying, we don't need much faith, just the seed of something that nurtured, will grow larger and larger in time and be able to do amazing things. The image is clear. Faith grows. But how?

.....And what is faith, anyways? The Webster's Dictionary describes it this way:

1 a : devotion to duty or a person : LOYALTY b : the quality of keeping one's promises. 2 a : belief and trust in and loyalty to God b : belief in the doctrines of a religion c : firm belief even in the absence of proof d : complete confidence.

All these descriptions together describe faith very well I think. In fact, this multi-faceted description tells us a great deal. Faith is not the mystical thing we like to think it is.

Because in the second part of the reading today Jesus is talking about serving. This is a very practical way of growing faith.

As one of my professors liked to say – “People don’t like the idea of servitude, but face it, we all serve something or someone.” And if we choose to serve God, then our lives will reflect that choice. The way we daily live out our sense of duty, our devotional practices, our commitment to delving into our Scripture and tradition, and our belief in, and experience of, the unseen is what will build up our faith. We can’t avoid our part in the building up of faith; we have our own work to do.

Jesus talks about right relationship. And it chaffs against our modern ideas of equality. The relationship between slave and owner was a relationship people in his day would have been very familiar with. It was woven into the fabric of life. People had slaves. The economy was based on slavery. We react against that.

So it’s more helpful to look at the point Jesus is trying to make with the owner/slave metaphor. Jesus is saying that there’s an implicit order that serves life. We all have roles, positions etc. and it’s important to understand, respect and work within the confines of these relationships. Jesus was forever challenging people to take their positions seriously and do so in service of others. He seemed to be saying, “How do you live with integrity in the situations you find yourself in?” Not everyone will have power or wealth. Equality is *not*

everyone having the same. Equality has to do with valuing human life and respecting human life. Equality is understanding in the marrow of our bones that we are all equal before God regardless of our circumstances here on earth.

Everyone serves someone or something. So Jesus is urging his disciples think clearly and understand their relationship to God. They are like servants. They are to serve. And not worry about getting their due.

Basically Jesus is saying, "There is a God, and it's not you! Everything you have is from God, so why are *you* looking for thanks??"

Another way of hearing this message is in the poem from Hafiz, a Persian poet from the 14th century who put it this way:

Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth, you owe me, you owe me. Look at what you can do with a love like that, it lights up the whole world.

Even after all this time, the river never says to the sea, you owe me, you owe me. Look at what you can do with a love like that, it covers the whole earth with life.

In other words, most of us have a sense of entitlement and equality that is way off base. This sense of entitlement is based in a worldly understanding of how life should be. But Jesus is saying, we are not earning our living, we are not working in order to be appreciated.... We can't earn a living, our life has already been given to us. And we are loved beyond measure so seeking appreciation doesn't even make sense!

God so loved the world. We are in God's debt. Yet God delights in the Divine exchange –the eternal flow of life, love, creativity. Seeking special attention doesn't even make sense. It requires that we step out of the exchange and say, "But look at me!" Instead we're invited into the abundant exchange where we give and we receive and all is well.

A couple of years ago I attended a baby shower for a very young mom. There were women of all ages there to support and celebrate with her; people were generous and the presents took over 2 hours to open. The amount of "stuff" was amazing. With each gift the young woman ripped open the paper, held the item up so we all could see, cameras flashed, she murmured a quick "thank you," and then was on to the next gift. At one point it was obvious she really liked a gift because she looked at a tiny little dress and exclaimed, "I want one exactly like this in my size!" The women in the circle clamoured, "Let me see, let me see!" She turned around the tiny dress and held it up so we could read what was written on the front. In disproportionately glittery large letters it said - "I want everything!" The room exploded with sound - "That's perfect! I want a dress like that, too!" "Me too!" "Me too!" "I want everything, too!"

We have been given everything. And in order to fully grasp this fully, we need to get practical and spend time in prayer, devotion, with our tradition, our Scriptures so that our way of understanding life will be changed. God has promised that this will happen. Our work is to become present to what is already ours instead of thinking it's something we have to work for and be worthy of.

No. It's the other way around. We are loved, we have been given life in abundance. Our work is to recognize, acknowledge this truth and give thanks. And our work is to support others in seeing this other-worldly view of life. Our joy, gratitude and willingness to serve are the best testimony. When we recognize how the Holy One is already active in the world, we lose our grumpiness, our judgement, our fear, our sense of scarcity.

The mustard seed has been planted in us. It is our birthright.

Our choice is whether we are going to nurture our faith through worship, prayer, reflection, study, friendship, community, creativity, service. All these things support us in seeing with different eyes – the eyes of the heart.

We are in debt after all. How can we possibly give back to God who not only gave us life, but sustains our life day by day? If we accept this Love - look at what can be done with a love like that - it lights up the whole world. We are invited to let that light show through us.

And then we will be the willing servants Jesus is calling us to be; grateful humble servants in awe of what we have been, are being, and will be given.

Amen.