

Message: "The Gospel's Abrasive Side"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 17:5-10

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you. ⁷"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

What is it about the lectionary readings for the past few weeks? They're really hard, sharing messages that are hard to understand, hard to apply, hard to rationalize, hard to live out. And here's a message today that is hard to hear. It's hard to hear because it shakes our understanding of the faithful life to its very core. What we have here is a message that throws many of our hopes on their end, for it states, in no uncertain terms, that living a faithful life is no guarantee of blessing.

The apostles demand from Jesus that he increase their faith. Jesus turns it right back at them and says that even if they had a miniscule amount of faith, even a mustard seed's worth, it would be sufficient for the life we have been given. Then, as if he was reading their hearts more than their minds, he puts it to them bluntly, referring to the images of a slave finishing his or her duties in the field or with the flock, coming into the master's house expecting great applause and warm fanfare, receiving congratulations for a job well done - **WHEN ALL THAT HAD BEEN DONE WAS COMPLETELY WITHIN THE REALM OF NORMAL EXPECTATIONS.** It is ridiculous, Jesus is saying, for one to expect excessive gratitude for the standard expenditures of effort faith requires.

This takes me back to a lesson I learned on the football field. Yes, you may be amazed to hear that once upon a time I played football. It was 1975; I was in the third grade; it was my first year playing real football, complete with helmets, shoulder pads, jerseys, and a custom-fitted mouthpiece to make sure we lost no teeth. I was large for my size, pretty athletic, the fastest runner in track and field for the previous three years, and well acquainted with the game - I had played pick-up games in my neighborhood for all of those years. There is no pride here when I state for the record, I was good. (OK, maybe a little pride?....) As to how well I played, well, let me just say that when the two team captains lined up to choose players, guess who was usually chosen first? I was so good that if I wasn't underage, I would have started my NFL career right then and there, or so I

thought; I was faster than anyone on any team. I just needed to prove myself formally.

Little league provided the chance. After a few practices, the day of our first game arrived. I was a defensive tackle of some sort, chosen because of my speed, of which I was very proud. During one of the very first plays in that first game, I remember setting my sights on the receiver who was certain to receive a pass from the quarterback; sure enough, the pass went to him, and I saw my chance. The chase was short, I caught up with him easily; I found myself lunging into the air in a graceful arc, catching him around the waist - but I just couldn't hold on. Nevertheless, I rolled off the edge of the field in glorious fashion, my duty done, the valiant effort to be acknowledged; I picked myself up and ran to the sidelines where I awaited the praise of my coach. He motioned to me to come over to him, and he said words I'll never forget - he said to me, "I NEVER WANT TO SEE ANYTHING LIKE THAT AGAIN!" He explained that I should always go for the feet, never the waist; my effort, he stated, was a complete waste. He was angry at me, and I was completely stunned; it was the last thing I expected; but perhaps the exact thing I needed, to become a better player.

I can almost see Jesus saying the same thing to his disciples after they ask for more faith - saying to them "I NEVER WANT TO HEAR ANYTHING LIKE THAT AGAIN!" Jesus is, in a sense, saying that they are completely missing the point of real faith - that they have more than sufficient faith for life - they just need to put it into play. And Jesus is saying that this is no great feat on the part of the person with faith - it is nothing more than what life should be. The bottom line is this: living life as it should be lived is its own reward.

What a foreign concept, back then as we sense the disciple's bewilderment, but perhaps even more significantly in our present day, when so much of our living is based upon expectations for life to be what we determine it to be. This is largely an age of entitlement, based upon assumptions such as inalienable rights and equitable justice and harmonious environmental relationship and economic stability. These are ideals we rightly seek to live up to, but we make a mistake when we assume faith follows the same rules. Faith does not begin with a bargain between us and God; faith begins by acknowledging that God holds all the cards.

But we live so deeply in an age of entitlement that we do not even understand what that term means anymore. We think because we are faithful we should receive a blessed life. That is an attitude born in entitlement. To be fair, there are instances in the Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, which

give the picture of faithfulness producing blessing. Faithful Noah saves his family as well as the human race; faithful Abraham and his wife Sarah beget Isaac; faithful Joseph saves his people when they arrive in Egypt; faithful David becomes king. But there are plenty of other examples of faithfulness leading to less opportune outcomes - take Job for instance, or Jeremiah, or Jonah or Ecclesiastes or Isaiah or most of the minor prophets or most of the major prophets; their faithfulness did not lead to lives filled with blessings; most times it was precisely the opposite. And I hardly need to mention that the most obvious and powerful examples of faithfulness ended in the cross of Christ and the beheading of Paul.

Faithfulness is thus no guarantee of blessing or praise. Perhaps the apparent abrasiveness of this truth is due to a misunderstanding of what it means to be blessed? I know that I've had my struggle with that concept in my life, especially with my family. For years, I told my children, as they were growing up, that I just wanted them to be happy. I don't say that to them anymore, for I think it is a lesser goal for life than what God intends. Our world is infatuated with the concept of happiness, from our Constitution's founding premise of human rights including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to the trillion-dollar worlds of entertainment, sports, and leisure. The goal of life, so the world seems to say, is to be happy at all costs.

So, just how is this working? How happy are we as a species? Especially those who are most involved in those trillion-dollar worlds?

I no longer say to my children, "I just want you to be happy." I say to them, "I want you to find meaning; I want you to find the things that make life worthwhile; I want you to live into the depth of reality, to see what really lies there, for you and for the world, for the universe of which you are a part. I want you to discover why you are here." It is in so many ways an unexpected blessing that they have all found meaning in their lives, expanding at the rate of growing families, expanding careers, and closer connections with each other and with their parents, and producing two of the cutest, smartest, most talented, and most beautiful grandchildren a grandfather could ever want (yes, I am biased!); but it is all grace, unmerited favor, blessing that can never be reduced to formula or degrees of righteousness. All one can say is a constant prayer of gratitude for the good that is.

The point is this: Real happiness cannot exist in the vacuum of human desire; there must be something profoundly foundational for what we think of as

happiness to endure, much less exist. There must be a worthy grounding of existence for that existence to be consistently and thoroughly experienced and enjoyed. Any other sense of happiness fails both the test of endurance and solidity, as fickle as our subjective experiences vary from person to person.

So what do we do with this message, that doing good never guarantees reward, that doing the right thing is nothing exceptional in God's perspective? What then is our motivation for being faithful, if it holds no promise of everyday life being better for it?

Well, doing the right thing, the true thing, the just things, the things that are promoted by being faithful in our attention and love of God, does open us to the normal, regular, and consistent grace made available to all. Another way of saying this is only those who are willing to step out in faith can discover the normal, regular, and consistent blessings that come with faithfulness. If you wonder what I mean by this, simply consider those persons of faith whose lives bear such hallmarks of struggle that they should be bitter, resentful, and mournful, but in fact they are quite the opposite - they are full of life, they are motivated in hope, they are generous to a fault, they are grateful beyond all reason. Do you know people like this? I've known so very many people who had every reason to be bitter who were very much the opposite - and their faith has everything to do with their disposition.

While it is true that a faithful life holds no guarantee of blessing, it is only the faithful life that is open to the blessings God offers. God does indeed bless, but unconventionally; God blesses in the manner and style of worldly reversals, blessing the meek, the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, and those who suffer for righteousness sake; only those who are willing to trust that such is the case are open enough to discover in real life that this is true.

And perhaps this is where the entitlements of life can be seen for their emptiness, for the more we demand our own personal rights, perhaps the less we pursue those of God? And miss the fact that those rights God claims for Godself are nothing less than working to providing for the life God intends us all to have?

I leave you with a quote I heard once upon a time, so long ago that I've lost the name of the author; but it is so relevant to the message of Jesus given to us today that I feel I would be amiss not to share it. The quote is this: "The most we can do is the least God expects; but the least God does for us exceeds anything we can do for ourselves." It is this understanding of blessing that constitutes the only real happiness possible in this world.