

Year C Proper 27 Luke 17 5 to 10

Well, worthless slaves, you've done only what you should have done...no thanks coming your way...no reward...

Does that sound like it fits in with Jesus' overall message of the good news of God's arriving kingdom? No, of course it does not. The "suck it up, buttercup" feeling we may get from hearing that line in today's Gospel story would be a serious misunderstanding of what Jesus is trying to tell us today. What is he trying to tell us? Let's find out.

Our story begins today with the panicked plea of the disciples: Increase our faith, Lord! Why do they suddenly feel that they need more faith? Because they have just been told by Jesus that they must forgive – over and over and over. They must forgive the repetitive, but repentant, sinner who just can't seem to get his act together. He says he's sorry and will never do it again but, there he goes, offending us with his sins again. And we must forgive him again. Really? Yes, really, Jesus says.

Well, if we must forgive over and over and over again, then give us more faith so that we have what it takes to do this. Jesus rolls his eyes and, with his loaded response that all they need is faith the size of a miniscule mustard seed, he tells them they've got it all wrong. They are asking for the wrong thing.

Jesus, ever the teacher, is making the point that faith is not a physically measurable thing. It is not something that can be simply handed over to the disciples after their desperate plea for more. You cannot fill a bigger bucket when you get more faith. You can not fill any bucket with faith. Jesus cannot hand out more faith by request. Faith is felt and known through lived experience. It is often

during or after the experiences when we need faith to get through them when we reflect and realize that our faith has been strengthened.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. showed us this when he described the fear that overcame him when he began receiving death threats during the Montgomery bus boycott in the mid-1950s. One night after a particularly troubling phone call, King found himself exasperated, unable to sleep, and ready to quit. While offering a humble, desperate prayer, King says that he felt the presence of God like never before and heard the words speaking to him in the depth of his soul, “Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.” As King notes, the outer situation remained the same, but God had given him inner calm. (story from workingpreacher.org; Francisco J. Garcia commentary). Faith is not just that you believe there is a God. Faith is being in relationship with that God. Trusting, loving, relying on that God. The deeper and stronger the relationship, the deeper and stronger faith will be.

Jesus’ outrageous answer to the disciples tells them that it is the right kind of faith – a faith anchored in a loving, trusting relationship – this is what matters...Quality, not quantity. Jesus pivots from quantity to sufficiency. His example using the tiny mustard seed that grows into a large, unruly bush is meant to shift their thinking of faith in terms of amount to thinking of its power. When you are in right relationship with God, that is all the faith you need: The faith you need to be one of his followers.

Jesus has been teaching his disciples all about the major qualities required to live as one of his followers in God’s kingdom. He has been teaching them and showing them a life of love and compassion and inclusion that naturally spills over into

acts of service to others and the forgiveness of others. As it was with Jesus, so it is meant to be with us – these marks of the life of a follower of God living in God’s kingdom are to be an ingrained, “do it without thinking”, part of who we are.

To explain this to his disciples, Jesus uses a problematic example – that of slavery. We instinctively pull back from embracing examples such as these because we know how horribly wrong the concept of slavery is. It is contrary to life in God’s kingdom and Jesus knows that as well. When we hear or read such things, we must not forget the whole of Scripture around it in which Jesus clearly advocates for the equality of all humankind. Based on the teachings of Jesus, the early Church ignored societal boundaries and shared the greeting of the peace of Christ – which is a part of our liturgy as well – with everyone present: male and female, rich and poor, gentile and Jew, slave and free...each greeted each other with a kiss of peace that would have shocked the sensibilities of the outside observers. This kiss of peace erased the boundaries that society had put into place. The small band of Jesus’ followers knew they could not openly revolt against and change the thinking of society – they would just get themselves killed. But they could slowly and surely subversively undermine this thinking – beginning with their small group and expanding – like the yeast in the dough that Jesus tells us about elsewhere.

And so, Jesus – without endorsing the concept of slavery – he uses it to make his point because it is a well-known part of society at that time. The disciples would understand his point. What is his point?

First, the word that we hear as “worthless” is actually better translated as “unworthy”. We are not worthless slaves as disciples. Jesus does not believe any

life is worthless. We do know that we are unworthy. We are not perfect, we mess up, we sin – we all fall short of the glory of God and yet God loves us and forgives us...continuously. Jesus is telling us that being his follower is not something that gets rewarded in and of itself. God does not thank us for believing by giving us love. That love is already there waiting for us to accept it.

Second, the idea of serving God – being obedient to God – is constantly connected with joy throughout all of Scripture. In Psalm 1 we hear, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked...but their delight is in the law of the LORD” (vv.1, 2). Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, “We are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith” (v.24). Luke, though, is the #1 spokesperson for joy in the New Testament. It infuses his Gospel and the Book of Acts from beginning to end with such statements as Mary’s, “My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour” (v.47) because of the good things God has done to accomplish salvation for the world. All of God’s rules are meant to guide us into right relationship with God and with each other – they are meant to foster all of the good things God desires for us...peace, happiness, unity...We know this because Jesus is able to sum up all of God’s laws with one word: Love. Love God. Love self. Love neighbour.

Lutheran Pastor, Karen Parker, writes this somewhat silly story to illustrate the point:

Once upon a time a person was allowed to visit both heaven and hell. The person went first to hell, where she was surprised to discover how nice it was. In fact, it was a wonderful place, like a luxury hotel, with every imaginable amenity. People were sitting at beautiful banquet tables laden with the best of everything. The food was abundant and inviting. Yet no one ate. It was then she noticed that

the people's arms were six feet long with no elbows. They couldn't bend their arms, and therefore they couldn't eat. Surrounded by food, they were starving!

Then the person was taken to heaven, where she was shocked to find the accommodations identical! There too people had six-foot arms with no elbows. But what a difference there was from hell: Here people were celebrating and feasting with great joy! You see, they were feeding each other! Service, reaching out in love to one's neighbour, is a mark of faith. (Augsberg Sermons Gospels, Series C, p.218).

Service – the result of living according to God's ways – brings joy because service is at the heart of trusting, loving relationships. If all you ever did was tell someone you loved them, that person will probably start to doubt your sincerity. You don't just tell someone you love them. You show them your love in the things that you do.

Finally, to understand why Jesus is using this master and slave example, we must remember what has just come before. It is in response to the disciples' plea for him to increase their faith. They've just heard that they must forgive, and forgive, and forgive, and forgive again. In response he is telling them that what they think is an extraordinary part of discipleship – difficult and beyond their capabilities – is, in fact, quite ordinary. To continuously forgive is to be a normal, everyday part of their lives, as typical of them as it is for a slave to look after the sheep and make dinner.

Luke places our faith within the context of everyday life. Here in this story it is with an emphasis on forgiveness. If faith is about being in relationship, and strengthening faith comes with strengthening relationship then it makes sense that forgiveness must be an integral part of this. We cannot be in relationship

without forgiveness. A relationship in which someone is harbouring grudges is a relationship that is not going to last very long or, at the least, will not be a healthy relationship full of joy. God is in relationship with us and has forgiven us. Our commitment to the ongoing practice of forgiveness is a reflection of our faithfulness to Christ. Love God. Love self. Love neighbour. None of those is dispensable. Faith requires relationship with God and with others...everyday, non-extraordinary relationship.

New Testament scholar, Ira Brent Driggers writes, "In a culture enamored by sensationalist news and highlight reels, it is easy to question our faith when it does not feel extraordinary. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with a mountaintop experience. But the most mundane act of faith carries extraordinary potential for transforming the world into the image of its Creator" (workingpreacher.org). I am reminded of Brother Lawrence, a 17th century monk who is known for the deep, close relationship with God that he found in his work in the kitchen of the monastery. Cleaning pots and pans and scraping food scraps into the pigs' trough he felt God with him.

We don't need to have the clouds open up, see a bright light and hear a deep booming voice from above. We do not need to feel extraordinary. We do not need to be extraordinary. What we need to be is "in relationship." Lord, increase our faith!