

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 2, 2022
 “Grateful Service” (Luke 17:5-10)

Our gospel text for today begins with the disciples saying, *Lord, increase our faith!* It seems that the demands of following Jesus were a bit overwhelming for them. And I get that. The things Jesus was asking of them were so contrary to the ways of the world and contrary to the ways they had lived their lives.

Jesus had told them things like:

Sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.

If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Forgive those who sin against you seventy times seven times.

It’s no wonder, then, the disciples ask for more faith. Living the Christian life is hard work, and they are looking for every advantage they can get to help them live as the Lord desires.

Things haven’t changed much in two thousand years. Living out the gospel is still a challenge for many of us, and, like the disciples, we think more would be better. *Lord, we can’t do all you ask with the faith we have, but if we had more...* However, more is not always better. Sometimes more is just more.

So Jesus uses the illustration of a mustard seed to tell his disciples that they already have sufficient faith to accomplish what he is asking of them. He tells them that acting on the faith growing within them – even if that faith is as tiny as a mustard seed – they can move mulberry trees. Jesus wants them to know that it’s not the *quantity* of their faith that matters, but the *quality*. More faith won’t yield any greater results if the disciples’ focus is on themselves. But when their faith is anchored in God – when they trust God to be God – they have all the faith they need.

What about us? Do we have this faith? Absolutely, for our faith doesn’t come through anything we have done or accomplished, but comes as a gift from God. And even though our faith may be as small as a mustard seed, God is telling us that, if it is anchored in him, it is more than enough. It’s all the faith we need. So, you see, the amount of faith is not important. What is important is using the faith we do have for the building up of God’s kingdom.

So, how does God want us to use our faith? The answer to that question, I believe, can be found in the parable Jesus tells about servanthood. The word *servant* or *slave* is used more than a thousand times in the Bible. That means it is a very big deal to God, and should be to us, as well.

Jesus tells the parable with a series of questions and answers. *As the master of the house, you have a slave to serve you. Your slave comes into the house after a long day of plowing and tending the sheep. Do you invite him to take a place at your table and dine with you? No, you tell him to prepare supper, to put on his apron and serve you while you eat and drink. Later, he may have his supper. And do you thank him for his service? No, for he has done what he was supposed to do. He has performed his duty.*

Now, if you are like me, it's hard to get your mind around this text. What, exactly, is our Lord telling us here? I would begin by saying that Jesus is looking for servants, not volunteers. A volunteer picks and chooses when and where to serve, or even if he will serve; but a servant serves no matter what. A volunteer serves when it is convenient, but a servant serves out of commitment. Volunteers contribute to the kingdom in their spare time, but servants work for the kingdom every day. For servants of Christ, then, the issue is not whether we will serve, but where we will serve.

So, to quickly recap: God gives us all the faith we need to go about the work of building his kingdom. And one of the ways we use this faith is to be a servant of Christ.

The parable then gives us a picture of what the servant's life looks like. First of all, a servant's work is not always glamorous. We are called to be faithful in extremely ordinary tasks. Look at the servant in the parable. He is probably the only servant his owner has. He does the back-breaking outside work all day, and then comes inside to prepare supper and clean up afterward. We, too, are called to serve in ways that aren't always glamorous: listening to our neighbor's troubles, giving a cup of water to a nursing home resident, preparing food for Mobile Café, cleaning up after a meal at church. Our service is performed through those little acts of love and kindness during the course of everyday life.

The next thing the parable seems to be saying is that a servant's work is continuous. After working all day, the servant comes back to the master's house. He is, no doubt, tired and hungry, but he still has work to do. He moves from hard labor to home life, from the fields to fixing food. He works from daylight to dusk. He serves continuously, whenever and wherever he is called to serve. Sometimes, we feel like we've put in our hard labor – serving on council or a ministry team, organizing and implementing an outreach project, teaching Sunday School or singing in the choir – and we just want to sit and relax a bit. However, as servants of Christ, we are called to serve in all times and places – at work, at home, at school, at play.

No doubt, our service will change as the seasons of our lives change. The ways we serve in our thirties are different from how we serve in our seventies, but we are still called to serve in every phase of life. No follower of Christ has the option of sitting down and having his or her needs met. There is always kingdom work to be done, and faithful servants will continue that work throughout the days of their lives.

Serving, therefore, is sacrifice. That's the third characteristic of a servant. The servant in the parable has worked hard all day. A word of appreciation would mean so much to him, but it never comes. The master does not thank him because the servant is doing what is expected of him. He is performing his duty. Now I know this sounds a bit harsh to our modern ears. Most of us are quick to express our thanks when someone serves us. But the master-servant relationship is different. The servant's job is to do whatever the master commands; but the master is obligated to the servant in no way. Nothing the servant does can earn the master's praise or obligate the master to repay him for his hard work. Here, Jesus draws an analogy between God and the master, and between us and the servant. He discourages the idea that we can somehow earn God's approval, or that God should be indebted to us for the good works we have performed.

When the disciples made the request for more faith, it certainly was to help them with the challenges they faced. But I also get the sense that they felt they deserved what they were asking. *Lord, look at all we've given up to follow you. Look at the many good things we've done. Don't you think you owe us something for our efforts. Then just give us a little more faith so that we can be even better at what we do and earn even more of your favor.*

They're not really unlike us. We, too, want to be appreciated for our service. We want to have our efforts recognized – a pat on the back from the church's leadership or for fellow members to applaud our service. Even worse is when this attitude begins to affect how we look at God. *God is so fortunate to have me serving in this way, yet he is not blessing me like I deserve. Where are my perks for following Jesus?*

Truth is, so many serve with way too many expectations. But our serving does not require God to do anything, just as the servant's work required nothing from the master. If we think about it, what more should we expect from God? He has created us, he has redeemed us from sin and death, he has blessed us with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in response to all that God has done for us, it should be our greatest desire to serve him. More than that, it is our duty and our delight. We are entitled to no more of God's favor than anyone else, for we all stand at the foot of the cross as beggars.

Jesus is telling us that, just like the servant, who by his hard work cannot earn the master's praise or consideration, we cannot earn God's favor or blessing by the good works we do. God's favor and blessing are gifts God gives to us freely. They are matters of grace, and can never be earned. Therefore, our service is a matter of duty, a sacrifice of praise offered to the God who loves us, heals us, and is present with us, not out of obligation, but because God so chooses to do these things.

I want to end with one final point. Even though our service is not always glamorous, even though we're called to perform it continuously, and even though it requires sacrifice, it is also satisfying. Jesus concludes by saying, *When you have done everything you were told to do, you should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'* This helps us see what being a servant truly involves. A servant's heart and will are bound to the will of another; and regardless of how much we do, we cannot do more than what is expected of us. So, instead of having feelings of entitlement, we need to see ourselves as unworthy servants; meaning that no one owes us anything. It's like paying our income taxes. When we mail that check to the IRS on April 15, we don't receive a thank you note from the government. We have simply performed our duty as a citizen and done what is expected of us. Likewise, God is under no obligation to reward us for the things we ought to be doing anyway.

When we begin to recognize our unworthiness – that because of our sinfulness, we can never honor God as he deserves – only then can we realize our obligation to him for saving us through Jesus the Christ. And when we begin to understand our unworthiness, our service to God becomes very satisfying and rewarding. That's because we no longer see it as an obligation or as a way to earn extra favor, but as an honor and privilege.

My friends, the Lord of glory has welcomed us into his service and given us the faith we need. May we be faithful – and grateful – servants, always ready and willing to serve God whenever and wherever we can. Amen.