

## ***Faith and Service***

Luke 17:5-10  
October 7, 2007

### **I.**

This is an important day for us. It's Newcomers Sunday, when we welcome people to St. Thomas who have not been here before. We pray we all can draw closer to God during this time.

In addition, as soon as this sermon is over, we will baptize five young people, and also welcome them into the church. Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children, and it's when we receive the Holy Spirit to dwell within us. It makes us members of the church that Jesus left behind, and it prepares us to be inheritors of God's eternal kingdom.

And note that I said that Baptism makes us members of the church that Christ left behind. I did not use the words "organized religion." Sometimes the church and organized religion can be two different things, and that is an entirely different sermon for another time.

### **II.**

The setting for today's sermon, however, is the Gospel reading we just heard. In the Episcopal Church the sermons traditionally are related to the readings about the Gospel, which are the stories about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in the first four books of the New Testament; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

However, that's not always the case. Sometimes sermons cover other themes. But today we will follow our tradition of preaching about the Gospel because there are important ideas in today's reading.

And sometimes these readings are straightforward. Sometimes Jesus speaks basic truths whose meanings are clear, such as the commandments to love God and our neighbors. Sermons on those readings can be easy. To use a modern cliché, it might be so easy a caveman could do it.

Other sermons are more difficult, like today. On these occasions when Jesus speaks to us across the centuries, from a different culture and society, he uses examples and illustrations that people in that time and place would understand, but that are a little strange to us now. We have to figure it out.

The story we heard today is an example of that. We heard about mustard seeds, and flying mulberry trees, and servants who have harsh masters.

Now, I grew up on a farm, but I don't think I ever saw a mustard seed. It was not one of our crops. However, they were common in the Middle East, and Jesus mentioned them several times. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, he said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed. [It] is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (13:31-32).

The point in that reading was that God can make something great from something that seems very small. And that same point also is in today's reading about faith. Even a small amount of faith can do great things.

Then we heard about a mulberry tree being uprooted, flying through the air, and landing in the ocean. That would be a spectacular sight, wouldn't it? But Jesus was not speaking literally. Again, he used it as an example to make a point. And the point was that faith enables God to work in our lives in ways that defy our own human experience. Through faith, God can perform what we think are miracles.

At the end of the reading we heard how Jesus described a servant who should get no recognition for doing something he was obligated to do anyway. Today this would seem a little harsh. We are not used to the idea of servants in our lives. But again, it was an illustration to make a larger point related to our call as Christians to faithful service.

So let's look at these two points in more detail. The first is faith, and the second is service. We will see that the first is a gift from God, and the second describes our response to that gift.

### **III.**

As background, in the Bible just before the part you heard today, Jesus told his disciples about some of the hardships of following him. Jesus knew the end of his time on earth was approaching and he was preparing his disciples for the difficulties they would encounter in the world after he was gone.

And they asked Jesus to increase their faith. In today's jargon they might say super size it, like more fries and a bigger Coke. They thought they needed more faith to get them through.

But Jesus said no, you don't need more faith. You have enough if you use it as God wants. Perhaps faith is like gas in our gas tanks, and a full tank might be like the mustard seed. Once the tank is full it doesn't do any good to try to put more in. It just spills on the ground. But we have to use our faith, just like we use our gas. If the car sits in the driveway we don't go anywhere. The same is true with faith. We have to exercise our faith to live into our own baptismal vows.

So at this point, it might be useful to think about what, exactly, we mean by faith. What is it, really? The term can be used pretty loosely.

We have faith, for example, in the laws of physics. We know that if we drop something it will fall because of gravity. We have faith in gravity. But we don't come to church to worship gravity, do we? Biblical faith means something else, something that has elements of uncertainty, or the unknown, about it.

Let's think then about faith and uncertainty. A month ago I had faith that the New Orleans Saints had a good chance to play in the Super Bowl. But look what has happened so far. And when we do look at the Saints' record we realize that our feelings were not really faith, but more in the category of hopes. Hope can be part of faith, but it is not faith itself.

And there are some other things we know are not faith. Faith is not like a spare tire, only to be used in emergencies. Faith is not like a bus or train, only to be ridden when it goes your way. Faith is not a light switch, to be turned off and on. And, most importantly, faith is not like an insurance policy, something to have around just in case everything you hear in church turns out to be true.

The Book of Hebrews defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). In the Old Testament faith was the certainty of receiving what God had promised but not yet provided.

For me, faith acts in our lives by causing us to believe certain things exist for which we have no evidence, but which are no less real merely because we cannot touch or see or fully understand them. And these realities include God's promise of salvation through Jesus Christ, and God's absolute trustworthiness in fulfilling that promise.

This means that faith comes to us from above, as a gift, through God's grace. It is not something we can create or manufacture through our own efforts. Understood in this way, faith has two elements; trust and belief on our part, and righteousness and reliability on God's part.

If we trust and believe, that is faith enough according to Jesus. That will fill up our tanks and we don't need any more. And through God's righteousness and reliability, powerful things can happen to bless us in our lives.

#### **IV.**

This leads to the second part of today's reading. We just discussed faith, now let's look at service. We heard that we cannot get extra credit for doing what we already have a duty to do anyway. The point of this is that we cannot, through our own efforts, make God be indebted to us. We cannot make God owe us anything just because we have done good things.

This does not mean that God will not reward us for good works. Last week we heard about our rewards in heaven. But these rewards are by God's grace; they are his idea. They are things God has chosen to do, not things God must do because we think we made him feel obligated.

Now, of course in our own relationships we give praise or compliments to each other for doing things that really are our duty anyway. We give certificates to people for completing years of service even though that service was expected of them. We recognize people who do good jobs even though they are supposed to do good jobs. And we very appropriately remember and honor those men and women in our armed forces who truly have done their duty.

But as far as God is concerned, if we believe we can deal with God on the basis of what we think he owes us, we are mistaken. God deals with us through grace. All we have are gifts from him. God had no obligation to create the human race. God had no obligation to give us free will. God could have programmed us to do exactly as he wanted all the time, but then that would not have counted.

God wants us to love him freely and not out of a sense of obligation, just as he loves and provides for us freely, and not out of a sense of obligation. Nothing we can do will change that. And so, as today's reading tells us, we should not think that we can pull any strings to manipulate God. We are called to be servants. God is the master. God is God, and we are not.

#### **V.**

So how do we live into our faith? How do we do our duty to serve God? Earlier I compared faith to gas in our gas tank and speculated that the mustard seed Jesus mentioned was like a full tank. When it's full you can't put any more in. And I also said that just as we have to use the gas to go somewhere, we also are called to exercise our faith to serve God's purposes.

But unlike the gas tank, there is a way to exercise our faith without using it up. That way is through the church. It is the way Christ intended when he gave his life for us. When he was resurrected after he died on the cross he sent his disciples out to build the church for us.

And when I say church I do not mean those parts of organized religion that make ritual and ceremony more important than God, or commercial Christianity that gives the church a bad name. I mean the church as Jesus intended it to be. I mean a group of people who truly worship together, who care for and support each other, and who make themselves present in the community to help and serve others.

I believe we try to achieve that ideal here at St. Thomas. Because we are human we will fall short of perfection, but we try. And when we try, we can exercise our faith to be of service. Then we can live and experience the more abundant lives that God wants for us. *Amen.*