

Faith And Duty

Luke 17:5-10

October 4, 2009

I.

It's that time of year again. The football season is in full swing, the stewardship campaign is underway, and after today's service we will have our fall clean-up of the building and grounds. And everyone is invited to stay and hang around the pavilion to enjoy the food later even if you are not on a work detail. We need a lot of supervisors.

My sermon today will be a little shorter for two reasons. First, I know we all are anxious to get to work while the weather is good. Second, after I finish, I would like to ask Nancy Boice to come forward and share some thoughts about St. Thomas.

And these things we're doing here focus our attention on the church. We're worshipping God, we will hear what the church means to one of our members, and then we will go out and care for our church.

And by term "church," I refer to our community as part of the body Jesus Christ left behind to carry on his work in the world. I distinguish this from some of the negative connotations associated with the words "organized religion." Often the church as Jesus intended it, and organized religion as society defines it, are two different things.

We know for example, there are many distorted ideas and false understandings of God that disparage or mock the church, or describe our faith as a fanciful tale that should be beneath us as so-called sophisticated and modern educated people. I just finished reading the new best seller by Dan Brown, called *The Lost Symbol*. He's the fellow, you might recall, who also wrote *The DaVinci Code*.

And like all of his other books, you buy this one in the fiction section of the bookstore. Even so, as I was reading it I was reminded of my days as a lawyer when it was important to understand what the other side was doing.

This book, in my opinion, clearly is a manifesto for other side, or at least for something other than Christianity. It does not offer common ground with what we do and say here. And it does not describe just minor differences in how we understand our faith.

And even though I will save a detailed exposition of this subject for another sermon, I mention it today because our Gospel reading calls us to consider our faith. And our faith often is challenged not only by people who spin yarns for commercial purposes, but also by those within the church who use the church to justify or advance personal agendas. That, again, is another sermon.

II.

But we still can look at today's reading in the context of what our faith means to us. 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 remember much about mustard seeds. It was not one of our crops. They were, however, 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 is that God can make something great from something that seems very small. And the same point is in today's reading. 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. It was an example to make the point that faith enables God to work in our lives in ways that defy human experience. Through faith, God can perform what seem to be miracles.

And at the end of the reading Jesus described a servant who should get no recognition for doing something he was obligated to do anyway. Today this might seem a little harsh. But again, it was an illustration to make a larger point about our Christian call to faithful service.

So let's examine these two points. The first is faith, and the second is duty. The first is a gift from God, and the second is the foundation of our response to that gift.

III.

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

And so they asked Jesus to increase their faith. In today's jargon we 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. Faith is complete in and of itself. Perhaps faith is like a full gas tank. It does no 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. Nothing much happens if the car sits in the driveway. The same is true with faith. We have to use it in our lives.

But what do we really mean by faith? 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 about God that is uncertain or unknown.

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.

We might say that 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. If we trust and believe, that is faith enough according to Jesus. It will fill up our tanks and we don't need any more.

IV.

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

This does not mean that God will not reward us for good works. The Bible is clear about rewards in heaven and the fruits of a Christian life. 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 of any obligation to us.

Now, of course in our own relationships we praise or compliment each other for doing things that really are duties 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.

But we cannot deal with God on the basis of what we think he owes us. God interacts 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 can we responsibly serve God? Earlier I compared faith to a full gas tank. You can't put in any more. 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. The tank stays full no matter how far we drive. We can do that through the church. It is what Christ intended after the resurrection when he sent his disciples out to build the church for us.

And beginning with those disciples, and continuing with believers over the centuries, the church was born, it has grown, and notwithstanding the wishful thinking of certain contemporary writers, it has survived. It has become a community of people who truly worship together, who care for and support each other, and who make themselves present in the community to 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 responsibly exercise our faith. Then we can know the more abundant lives that God wants for us. *Amen.*