

Believing and Serving

Habakkuk 1:2-4, 2:1-4, Luke 17:5-10

October 3, 2010

I.

If you read comic strips as regularly as I do you might be familiar with "Peanuts," the critically-acclaimed strip about several young kids and a lovable dog named Snoopy. And one of the leading characters is a little boy named Charlie Brown, a very earnest and sincere fellow.

But Charlie Brown never seems to get what he wants. He doesn't get to kick the football, he cannot pitch a winning game, the great pumpkin never shows up, his kite always gets caught in a tree, and he invariably fails to win the affections of the little red-haired girl.

But he always tries. His faith never is shaken, his hope always is there, and he consistently perseveres in the face of repeated obstacles. His frustrating experiences even have passed into popular culture and are known as the Charlie Brown Syndrome. And it's characterized not by failure but by a belief that someday things finally will go your way.

I remember some of my own youthful Charlie Brown occasions in classrooms and activities, and on athletic fields and playgrounds. I'm sure we all have similar memories. And I still thank my parents for encouraging me to have faith that good things would prevail over bad things.

II.

Our readings today from the Old Testament and the Gospel of Luke embrace this idea. They move into the spiritual realm and speak to the great themes of faith and duty that are at the foundation of the church and our worship. The reading from Habakkuk asks "How long?," and the Gospel raises the question of "How much?"

Habakkuk was a prophet who wrote during the sixth century before Christ. At that time the Hebrew people had fallen far from their earlier promises of obedience to the laws God had given them through Moses. Idol worship flourished. Social injustice within the Jewish society was prevalent. Worship was corrupted and served the priests rather than the people.

So Habakkuk plaintively asked, "How long," O Lord, will this go on? When are you going to do something about it? Haven't we felt the same way? Don't we sometimes get a little frustrated when God just doesn't seem to grant our perfectly reasonable requests?

And then God replied to Habakkuk that he was on top of it. God said, "There still is a divine vision [for the end of wickedness and injustice]. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay [for] the righteous live by their faith."

And although Habakkuk did not live to witness the Lord's words come to pass, we know that they eventually did. The Jewish homelands were destroyed by invaders, the people went into exile, and then the invaders themselves were destroyed. But a Jewish remnant survived and after a generation returned to Jerusalem. And in time, the prophesied Messiah, Jesus Christ, was born.

So when Habakkuk asked "How long?," God's answer was, "Have faith." It's coming. God told Habakkuk to believe in his promises, and that their fulfillment would not be delayed.

And of course God meant that fulfillment would not be delayed from God's perspective. Our perspective is different. "Right now" for us and "right now" for God can mean different things. God's time is not our time and God's plans are not our plans.

Even so, God still calls us to trust and believe and wait. There simply are things we don't know and cannot understand. If we could, it just wouldn't be faith. And the story of Habakkuk is an ancient example of that eternal truth.

III.

The Gospel moves us forward a few centuries. And instead of asking how long we have to wait in faith, this reading from Luke shifts to a question of how much faith we need. The Apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith. In today's jargon they might have said to super-size it, like more french fries and a bigger Coke. They thought they needed more faith to do their work.

But Jesus, again using symbolic language, said they didn't need more faith, and that if their faith was the size of a mustard seed they could cause a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea.

Now, I grew up on a farm, but I don't remember much about mustard seeds. It was not a local plant. They were, however, common in the Middle East, and Jesus mentioned them elsewhere. In Matthew's Gospel 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 is evident in today's reading. Even a small amount of faith can do great things.

And of course an uprooted mulberry tree flying through the air and landing in the ocean would be a spectacular sight, wouldn't it? But again 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 would seem to be miracles.

So we are led to understand that true faith is a matter of quality rather than quantity. It is complete in and of itself. It 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.

IV.

This leads to the last part of today's Gospel. We move from a conversation about faith to a consideration of duty. The first is a gift from God, and the second is how we respond to that gift.

Jesus described a servant who should not be praised for doing something he was obligated to do anyway. The language of the reading might seem a little harsh, but again it is an illustration to make a larger point about our Christian call to faithful service.

And it simply means that God does not give us extra credit for doing what we already have a Christian duty to do anyway. 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.

But this does not mean that God will not bless us for good works. The Bible is clear about rewards in heaven and the fruits of a Christian life. These rewards, however, are by God's grace, and they are his idea. They are things God has chosen to do, not things God must do because of any obligation to us.

And our own social practices should not be applied to suggest otherwise. We often 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 that we have are gifts from him. God had no obligation to even 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.

That's because God wants us to love and serve him freely and not with a sense of obligation, just as he loves and provides for us freely and not with a sense of obligation. Nothing will change that. We are called to be servants and God is the master. God is God, and we are not.

V.

So, these readings present two questions. How do we live into our faith? How do we do our duty to serve God?

Our faith begins with our continuing acknowledgment that we simply are called to trust and believe that God's promises in the Bible are real even though we do not have hard evidence in the legal sense. And those promises are no less real merely because we, in the limitations of our humanity, cannot comprehend or fully understand their divine character.

The Book of Hebrews tells us that faith "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). And if we truly believe God's promises through Jesus Christ, we know our faith is there and we don't worry about how much. We seek to deepen our faith in its quality rather than trying to increase its quantity.

Earlier I compared faith to a full gas tank. This leads to the second question, doing our duty to God. We actually have to use that gas tank of faith in order to serve God's purposes.

But unlike the regular 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 all people.

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, as a community of people who worship together, who care for and support each other, and who make themselves present in the community to serve others.

I believe we do try to achieve that ideal here at St. Thomas. Because we are human we fall short of perfection, but we try. We do it when we gather in worship and prayer to share our faith, and we do it when we act through discipleship and ministry to exercise our faith.

And to this end, I want to offer a brief commercial message. We have updated our mission and ministry booklet for 2011, and copies are on the table in the foyer under Bishop Gray's picture. It describes the things we do here at St. Thomas, some every day and some periodically. It also lists ideas for new ministries that some of you might want to start.

We also have begun our "ministries of the month," which are three ministries that are highlighted for special attention. The October ministries are listed on a sign-up sheet in Johnson Hall, and we urge you to consider them. They will change in November, so let us know if you have a special ministry you want us to emphasize in the coming months.

Please take a ministry booklet and review it. Think about signing up. I pray that this can be one of the many things that helps us hear the Holy Spirit's call to have faith in God's Word, and to serve God and the Church. *Amen.*