

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 17:5-10

The apostles came up and said to the Master, “Give us more faith.”

But the Master said, “You don’t need more faith. There is no ‘more’ or ‘less’ in faith. If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, ‘Go jump in the lake,’ and it would do it.

“Suppose one of you has a servant who comes in from plowing the field or tending the sheep. Would you take his coat, set the table, and say, ‘Sit down and eat’? Wouldn’t you be more likely to say, ‘Prepare dinner; change your clothes and wait table for me until I’ve finished my coffee; then go to the kitchen and have your supper’? Does the servant get special thanks for doing what’s expected of him? It’s the same with you. When you’ve done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say, ‘The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.’”

After the 1986 meltdown at Ukraine's Chernobyl nuclear power plant, a large number of plant workers courageously went back into the facility, even though they were facing unknown and, very possibly, lethal doses of radiation. The most urgent task was constructing the concrete "sarcophagus" that would completely enclose the damaged reactor building, thereby containing as much radiation within that structure as possible.

These workers, known as "liquidators," because they were attempting to liquidate the negative effects of the disaster, did the best they could to protect themselves, but it soon became apparent that self-protection was a losing battle. The protective clothing issued to them was inadequate, so some of them simply held lead sheets in front of their bodies. Most worked in shifts of only minutes at a time, in an attempt to reduce their exposure further.

Some 350,000 of the liquidators received radiation doses equal to 1,000 chest x-rays about five times the recommended maximum doses for—immediately lost their lives to radiation poisoning, while another 106 were treated and survived. Approximately 90,000 of the liquidators are facing long-term health problems as a result of their exposure.

Such is the price of duty. Yet, without the courage of these workers, putting themselves in harm's way, the effects of the disaster on Europe would have been vastly larger. Why would anyone put themselves in that kind of a situation, knowing that they would be putting themselves in harm's way?

This triggers thoughts about a more personal question, “Why do you say and do what you say and do?” Are you looking for something in return, perhaps some kind of reward—say like, heaven? Christians know that eternal life is granted to those who receive Christ’s salvation and then remain faithful to the teachings of Jesus. So, do we say the things we say and do the things we do so that we win the big prize of eternal life? Today’s text challenges us to think on these things. Let’s take a closer look at this story.

Just prior to this text, Jesus was teaching his disciples about forgiveness. Jesus was teaching his disciples that even if someone hurts them personally—say, seven times in a day—and comes to them each time asking them for forgiveness. They were supposed to forgive those who hurt them. Now, Jesus wasn’t limiting the times that the disciples or us should forgive someone to seven times. Jesus was making the point that we should forgive those who hurt us as many times as is necessary. We know that forgiving someone is not always easy to do, and the disciples knew that too.

Perhaps, feeling down on themselves because they find this hard to do, the disciples asked Jesus to give them more faith so that forgiving others would be easier for them to do. Jesus answered their request by telling them that the amount of faith they have is not as important as the genuineness of their faith.

Let's take a moment here to define faith. Faith is total dependence on God and a willingness to do his will. It's not simply a matter of believing in God. Faith is not something we use to put on a show for others. It is complete and humble obedience to God's will, readiness to do whatever God calls us to do.

Jesus compares faith to a mustard seed. The mustard seed is small, but it is alive and growing. Like a small seed, a small amount of genuine faith in God will take root and grow. We don't need more faith to do God's will—a tiny seed of faith is enough, if it is alive and growing.

The important thing here to note is not that the tiny seed turns into a big plant; but the actual process of growing is the focus. In other words, we either have faith or we do not. Faith is something that is alive in and through us AND it grows. It grows each time we are obedient to God and step out in faith to do God's will.

After making this point about faith, Jesus goes on then to tell one of his parables. It is a parable about a Master and the role of a servant to his master. At first the parable puts us in the position of being the master, wondering what that would be like, finding that the expectation of the servant is to do as he is told because it is his duty, and the master expects the servant to do his duty without complaining and expecting a reward. The servant does what his master wants done before he even thinks of doing something for himself. The servant does what he does out of obedience to his master, not because he wants a reward.

Then Jesus turned the tables, and he challenges us to see that we are God's servants. As servants we are expected to do God's will out of obedience to God. Jesus' parable stresses that we should serve God because it's the right thing to do, not because we hunger for a divine reward. In the words of the Nike slogan, we should, "Just do it!" We actually just might find that doing the right thing without being praised or rewarded brings a kind of satisfaction of its own.

A man named Jake tells of the early days of his marriage when there was friction between him and his wife Melinda because of his assumption that she would do all the housework, despite the fact that they both had full-time jobs outside the home. After several confrontations about this, he finally realized he'd been unreasonable, and so he decided to help out. The first thing he tackled was the kitchen; he did all the dishes, wiped the counters and swept and mopped the floor. Then he eagerly waited for Melinda to come home, expecting that she would lavish him with praise.

When she did come home, she seemed to notice the work in the kitchen but said nothing. Finally, Jake could stand it no longer, and he blurted, "Did you see I cleaned up the kitchen?" "Yes," she said. He waited, but Melinda had nothing more to say. So, he said, "Well, don't you appreciate it?"

"I'm glad you've done the work," she said, "but we both live in the house and keeping it clean is just part of our responsibilities. I've never been thanked for all the housework I've done, and I don't expect to be. Why should either of us be thanked for doing what's necessary to live decently?"

It took some readjustment of his thinking (to say nothing of his pride), but Jake got the point, enough so that he kept doing a share of the housecleaning. And even though he never particularly enjoyed the work, he began to take a certain satisfaction in keeping the home

reasonably tidy. Likewise, there can be a certain satisfaction in serving God even when no thanks seems to be forthcoming.

Jesus' teachings about serving steers us away from the notion of entitlement and reminds us that we don't earn our way into the kingdom of God, but we are granted entrance because of God's graciousness to us. God's not keeping a count of the good things you do, giving you a star every time you do, counting those stars in the end to determine whether you get into heaven. It also reminds us that it's not the quantity of our faith that matters, but what matters is putting what faith we have into service.

That means then that even that which looks completely impossible becomes possible if it is approached with faith. If we approach a thing saying, "It can't be done, so, why even try" it will not; if we approach it saying, "It must be done," the chances are that it will. And we must always remember that we approach no task alone, but that with us there is God and all of God's power.

I am going to close with this an old sermon illustration about a man seeking entrance to heaven based on his good works. The man came to the Pearly Gates and asked Saint Peter for admission. "On what basis?" Saint Peter asked. "Well," said the man, "I worked most recently in the world of financial management, and I labored hard to make even that realm a place where God's will be done." "Yes," replied Saint Peter, "but, of course, we expected that."

"Uh well, earlier I worked several years at low wages in the mission field. I tackled the causes of poverty and injustice in the Third World. I worked directly with children, families and their communities. I even helped some people escape from human traffickers." "We know, but that all needed to be done," Peter said. "But look here. I've worked hard to be faithful ever since God called me. I've kept my hand on the plow as it were and not looked back." "And your point is?" asked Peter. The man, now clearly disconcerted, stammered, "That's all I've got! There's nothing more but the grace of God!" "Exactly," said Saint Peter, opening the gate. "C'mon in."

Jesus said, "You don't need *more* faith. There is no 'more' or 'less' in faith. When you've done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say, 'The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.'" May it be so. Amen.