

Year C-Pentecost17-Propser21-2019

October 6th, 2019

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Luke 17:2-10

“Worthless Slaves”

Increase our faith! Do it for us! Use magic if necessary! Make us believers. Save us from the rising water, the warming air, the increasing acidity of the ocean. We have heard you love us and we believe you won't let us destroy ourselves from our wasteful ways. Just because earth's feedback systems are weighed down with prophetic information doesn't mean we should cross examine ourselves. No, Lord, you do it. “Increase our faith.” If you increase our faith, we won't have to exercise faith to build it. We won't have to get up early on a morning and put on our sweats and head to the gym, work out on the tread mill, lift weights, stretch our muscles and stagger home again. You know what I mean.

Increase our faith so that when our neighbor criticizes us for doing things they don't agree with we won't have to quietly, non-violently, gently stand our ground and define ourselves as different from our neighbor. We hate having to swim against the stream, move in the opposite direction, and expose ourselves to ridicule and criticism like the story of Noah and the Ark in those days he spent building his boat. Lord, if you were to increase our faith none of this hard work would be necessary; no discipline, perseverance, determination, self-examination, prayer, and conversation with others would be necessary. Even self-doubt would be pushed aside by the Lord's mighty hand.

But if the Lord does it for us, has our faith increased? How do we participate in increasing our own faith or do we just passively wait for it? It's your fault Lord. I asked you to increase my faith but you never did. That's your bad Lord, not mine!

Jesus' answer ignores their attempted manipulations, their seeking to get him to do their work. When you look at it with this in mind, his answer makes more sense. “The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you.” His response is almost a taunt. If you had the tiniest amount of faith you can do incredible things. Is he implying they already have enough faith, they just aren't using it? They have muscles, they just aren't developing them. Their request for more faith is an excuse for not developing the faith they have.

We now come to the politically incorrect Jesus. He says, “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending the sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once

and take your place at the table?’ No, of course not! You would say to him ‘prepare supper for me, put on you apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink.’

First Jesus taunts them for wanting him to do their work. Now he seems to pull rank by putting them in the category of slaves owned by another. He seems to be saying they don’t ask their owner to do things for them. They serve their owner and do things for him. Is this a form of know your place and do as you are told?

A few weeks ago I got a text from Mike telling me that he and Rick had completed another ramp so that a disabled person could get in and out of their house. The picture showed a ramp leading to the front door of a single wide manufactured home that looked to have been at this location for a long time. I thought about how to respond in a respectful and appropriate way. I came up with something like, “I really respect what you are doing.” Mike’s response to that was, “It is what we do.” Mike understood himself as responding to human need and at a different level I think he and Rick knew they were acting as servants of the living God. They were just being servants. It’s who they were and what they do.

We are people of no particular standing. We just do what we have been told to do. As we humble servants do what we have been told to do by our Lord, our faith increases and our increasing faith makes it possible to do far more than we ever dreamed we could. But we must get self out of the way, assume an attitude of being at the lowest place and comfortably know ourselves as humble servants of our living Lord.

Doing something that comes from who we are and who we are following does not call for thanks and recognition. That’s not why we do it. We do it because that’s just what we do.

Our son Aaron had his annual job review last week. His supervisor brought out his review from 2016 and they compared where he was then with where he is now. He was flabbergasted with how much he had grown. He said, “I can do so many more things now than I could then,” and he shook his head in astonishment. He worked hard on himself, was a faithful employee, listened to his mentors, absorbed disappointment and occasional failure without giving up and in general humbled himself to the point of being able to learn. Our talking about it was a wonderful moment in our family. He had gotten over waiting for the Lord to increase his faith and had embraced, “Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

Don’t be offended by the word “worthless” here. It points to an attitude, a habit, a discipline, a stance towards one’s self before God that gets “self” and “me first” out of the way so that service remains purer and not so self-serving. I wondered what some of the commentators would say about this phrase. The Harper Collins Study Bible says, “*Worthless slaves* implies”

those to whom nothing is owed.” Paul Neuchterlein, in his on-line commentary says, “You do not serve your master, helping to usher in God’s Kingdom, with the expectation of being thanked. Working for the kingdom of God should provide its own thanks. It is itself a life lived in thankfulness.”

There is nothing that increases faith more than humility and the willingness to take the lowest place out of gratitude. From the lowest place we can see things we couldn’t see from any other position. When we are in that position and doing what we are supposed to do as slaves, God can increase our faith making it possible for us to do things we never imaged we could do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.