

***Just Doin' Our Job***  
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**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**October 13, 2019**  
**Luke 17:1-10**

Everybody likes to be recognized. Everyone likes to feel appreciated. Whether we're young children or adults, we like to think we're special – because, well, we just do. We Americans have come up with dozens of special days to ensure that no one in our culture go unthanked or uncelebrated. You all celebrate a birthday, of course, and you're familiar with holidays like Valentine's Day, Veterans' Day, and the like. But now we have Administrative Professionals' Day, Mother-In-Law's Day, Stepfamily Day, Bosses Day (how did that get there?), Loyalty Day, International Midwife Day, Vegan Day, and National Children's Day. We even have Citizens' Day, perhaps to make sure we catch all the people we didn't get to congratulate on any of the other days. In 2019 America, it is apparently important that everyone, and everything, feels appreciated, whether they've done anything or not.

The need to feel like we are adequately rewarded for our efforts is part of human nature. Human beings are by their nature economic animals, and by that I mean that they tend to pursue their own best interests. They want to do what rewards them. And that's okay, usually. But it's a problem when self-interest becomes our primary motivation – when consciously or unconsciously, the main question in what we devote our lives to is “What's in it for me?”

This human tendency to want to get something for our efforts is the reason why Jesus' words to his disciples in today's reading from Luke strike a kind of dissonant cord for us. Jesus asks who, if you had a servant who had spent the day working in the fields, would invite him to relax while you served him dinner? No, you would tell him to get you your dinner, because that was his job. He should not expect a reward, or even thanks. No blue ribbons for participation here. He is only doing his job, and what servants do is serve.

We might also have a negative feeling about Jesus' lessons when he talks about slavery, and with good reason. But Jesus is merely using a cultural context that his listeners will understand. He is not giving his support to the institutions of slavery or indentured servitude. And Jesus certainly doesn't intend for us to allegorize this story to the point where we see God as a slave-owner. If we think about it, it wouldn't be too hard to come up with a parable that would be more palatable in our culture. Who among us, after microwaving our chicken pot pie,

picks up the phone to call the electric company to say “thanks for the kilowatts?” No one, of course. People have roles in life that we just assume are going to be fulfilled, because it’s somebody’s job.

Jesus makes just such an assumption about us today. “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” (Luke 17:10) So much for self-esteem! If we are really interested in attracting others to Christianity, this is one passage from the lectionary we might not want to dwell too long on. Just what kind of a life is Christ calling us to?

Jesus said so many things that sound nearly impossible to appropriate for our modern lives, but the difficulty in modern life often comes from the fact that you may be the only one practicing them. Jesus taught us, “If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.” (Luke 6:29) Now, if everyone is sharing their extra coats, you should be fine. But if it’s just you, you’re going to be mighty chilly. Jesus’ saying, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35) is fine, but it’s tough if you’re the first one to be last. That’s what Jesus was, and look what it got him. You can consider yourself an unworthy servant, but if everyone else thinks they’re a master, you are going to be pretty busy. The point is that the power of much of what Jesus taught us can only be realized within the context of a supportive and faithful community of believers. Jesus always calls us into a life of service in the plural.

There is a wonderful story that illustrates this point. A traveler was driving down a dirt road in the dead of night when suddenly he missed a turn, and drove off into the ditch. He hiked for some time looking for help, and finally came to a farm house. He asked the farmer if he could bring his tractor to pull the car out of the ditch. The farmer replied that he didn’t own a tractor, only an old blind mule named Sally. But he said they’d see what they could do. When he had hitched the mule to the car, the farmer shook the reins and shouted, “Go, Sally, pull!” The car didn’t budge. The farmer snapped the reins again and yelled, “C’mon, Sam, pull!” The car began to move. Finally, the farmer yelled, “Hey, Joe, pull!” and the car was back up on the road.

The man thanked the farmer, but he just had to ask the farmer why he had called the mule all those different names. The farmer replied, “Well, you may remember that I said that mule is blind. If she thought that she was the only one pulling, your car would still be in the ditch.” Thinking you’re the only one pulling is not a recipe for a rewarding walk with God, or, for that matter, for a vital Body of Christ.

It is within the community to which God calls us – the community of people who all serve, just because that’s what servants do – that we come to realize that we may be unworthy, but in no way are we without worth.

There's something else going on in this reading. Luke leads into Jesus' discourse on serving with an incident that doesn't seem to relate at all. The reading starts off with the disciples asking Jesus, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5) Jesus responds with a puzzling sort of non-answer. He tells them that with only the tiniest bit of faith, they can say to a mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea!"

Now, in our lifetimes I'm sure we've all given in to the temptation to pray for things that others might consider frivolous. I am an avid fly-fisherman, and I will admit that on slow days on the stream, I have prayed for God to let me catch just one fish. And I know, that's frivolous. I wonder, though: is that any more frivolous than, say, a prayer that a giant mulberry tree will be uprooted and replanted in the middle of the ocean? But that's exactly what Jesus tells the disciples they'd be able to do if they had faith – to send mulberry trees flying into the sea! Was Jesus just being oblique, or maybe a little whimsical? In any case, he certainly didn't seem to be addressing the demand the disciples made of him that he "increase their faith." What did Jesus mean?

Jesus may have been telling them that faith is not a quantity that is subject to measurement. Faith is an orientation. Faith is more than believing in something you can't see. Faith is the relationship with our creator that is both initiated and empowered by the creator's grace. And faith is either there or it isn't. And I think what Jesus may be saying to the disciples is this: "You don't need more faith. The question is, are you living faithfully with the faith you've got? Because if you can do that, you can't imagine the exciting things you will see God do, even if your faith is no bigger than a mustard seed!"

And here's how I think this little discourse on faith is connected to Jesus' story about the servants. Faith is trusting that God can and will do the things he promises. And when you live in a fully trusting relationship with God, you respond to God's will automatically, instinctually, seeking neither reward nor praise, but simply desiring to do the bidding of your Lord. Faith has no meaning when separated from the fundamental understanding that we owe allegiance to whatever we say we believe in. What is important to the Master must be important to us, as well. The Apostle James said this a little differently in his oft-quoted observation that "faith without works is dead." (James 2:20) I'm not sure I agree that it's dead exactly. But it's certainly barren. It's certainly not what the Master wants.

Living faithfully means putting the Master's wishes first. It means we serve because we have been asked to serve without concern for getting rewards, or even thanks. We serve just because we are servants, and that's what servants do. And then God can do extraordinary things with us. God can do things our limited imaginations cannot even conceive of – maybe not uprooting mulberry trees and casting them into the ocean, but things that in their own way are every bit as spectacular.

What a vision for our family of faith. We are all the Body of Christ when we step out together in faith. Jesus asks us today to imagine what wonders we might see looking through the eyes of faith. Imagine Pound Ridge Community Church, and churches all over the world, filled to the rafters with servants. Imagine the fruits of a billion mustard seed-sized faiths: loving, giving and serving, together -- just doing our job.

Just imagine.