

Twenty –Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 17:5-10 in its biblical context

The Gospel begins with the apostles' response to a very difficult direction Jesus had just given them, 'if your brother wrongs you seven times in one day, and returns to you seven times saying, 'I am sorry,' you should forgive him' (Lk 17:4). The apostles must realize that such generous forgiveness seems almost beyond human ability, so they ask Jesus to increase their faith.

This request reveals that the apostles are beginning to understand that the spiritual life is not so much about what they are doing for God as it is about what God is doing for them through Jesus. They realize that if they are to live up to Jesus' teaching about forgiveness they will need more faith, and so they ask for this gift. Jesus affirms the power of faith when he says that with faith they could do what otherwise seems impossible; they could say to a mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey them.

Next Jesus tells the apostles to think themselves as "unprofitable servants." The words *unprofitable* and *servant* might have negative connotations for us. However, the word *servant* or *slave* would not necessarily have had such a negative connotations for the original audience. To be the slave of a king was considered a great honour. Jesus is not teaching his apostles to have a subservient attitude or to lack self-respect. Rather, he is encouraging them to have an attitude of service rather than an attitude of pride. The apostles have had plenty of opportunity to witness a prideful attitude in Jesus' adversaries. As we have seen, because Jesus' adversaries obey the law more strictly than does Jesus, they feel that they have earned God's favour and are superior to Jesus and to 'sinners'.

By contrast, Jesus instructs the apostles to think of themselves as God's servants. However, no amount of service can earn God's love because God's love is a freely given gift. So, in this sense, the apostles are unprofitable servants. Rather than trying to earn God's love, the apostles are learning to serve in love as a response to God's initiative in their lives. Then, instead of being full of pride and self-righteousness, they will be full of love and gratitude. They will be able to say, "We are unprofitable servants, we have done what we were obliged to do," and mean it from their hearts.

Faithful service is not something extraordinary which merits praise and recognition; disciples are expected to be faithful in their service of the Master. Further, servants are servants for life. Whether a menial servant or a chef servant, there does not come a time when the master says, "your service and seniority entitles you to be served."

Reflection

When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, Jesus answered them by first saying that quantity was not really the issue and then went on to speak about fulfilling everyday obligations. In following Jesus, doing dramatic things is not the issue. After all, the master does not order his servant to move a mulberry tree by faith, but to meet ordinary expectations – serve table, wait on him do whatever is commanded. The issue is to be faithful to the master and his commands. It is by such fidelity that faith increases.

A reflection on faith does not begin with ourselves but with the Master, with God. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel has faith because God has unfailingly made good on God's promise to enact mighty deeds of salvation. Israel's faith, then, is a trusting response to a faithful God. Faith is relational – we put our faith not in something but in someone. God is true to who God is when God carries forward the plan for our salvation. We are true to who we are when we obediently cooperate in that plan of salvation. Fulfilling our Christian obligations is more than an exercise of responsibility or obedience. It expresses and reinforces our relationship to Jesus. He is the Master, we are servants. Faith is expressed in the way we act. It is extraordinary; not in the stupendous acts we might do for God and others, but in terms of the consistent and enduring choices we make daily to act righteously, humbly, mercifully and justly, as well as being forgiving and reconciling – that is, to be obedient to all that Jesus has asked of us. Faith is a way of living, a way of expressing our true selves such that we act toward others like the Divine has acted towards us.

The second part of the gospel suggests to us that we are to do simply what is obliged of us and expect nothing more. This is what the 'unprofitable' in the last line means. We do not do what we are supposed to do in order to be rewarded, but we do it simply because that is what is expected of us. Thus, one aspect of faith is recognizing that doing what disciples are supposed to do in itself does not earn God's beneficence. Heaven is not a 'reward' for being faithful. Heaven is the amplification of the way we live our present life. What we are 'obliged to do' is be faithful. To be faithful is being the servant of all. Faithfulness is confidence that God will fulfil God's promise to us of salvation and deliverance. Being faithful in this life is already living what heaven will be!

Questions for Faith-Sharing Groups

- When have I wanted my faith to be increased?
- How has my faith been increased?
- As an 'unprofitable servant,' what am I 'obliged to do' for God?
- How would you describe the gift of faith? Have you personally experienced the power of faith, either in yourself or in someone else? Explain.
- Do you feel resistant to the idea of being God's servant? Why or why not?