

Sermon
Proper 22, Year C
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by the Rev. Norman Bray

Increase our faith. That was the desperate plea of the Apostles'. In today's gospel we are not given the whole story, we don't get to hear the first 2 teachings in this chapter that prompted the apostle's outburst. The first two teachings were a warning against causing others to stumble, and the challenge to be forgiving, two very challenging teachings that go contrary to human nature. I think I understand one of the apostles cried out to Jesus "increase our faith." How many times have each of us asked God to do the same thing "increase our faith," when we are in those difficult places that life puts us in occasionally? How many times have we had faith in the wrong things? How many times have we had faith in our own strength, our own power, our own money? All of these things will fail us but that's not the way that faith in God works and Jesus sets us straight very quickly, faith is not quantitative but rather qualitative. Faith is a relationship between us and our God and asking Jesus to increase that relationship does not make any sense. Think of your faith as a window between you and God. If this window were to admit light then the size of the window would be important but this window is between us and God and its purpose is to admit god's grace and because of that if this window were no more than a pinhole than would be overwhelmed by God's grace. So you see, Jesus recognized that the apostles had faith, and obviously sufficient faith because they had been out on the road healing, casting out demons, they had

faith that they were afraid that what Jesus was asking them to do was too much. They were afraid that they would be unable to treat people in the way that Jesus required. They were afraid also that they couldn't always be good examples. Who among us is always at our best, always being a shining example of a good Christian, living out the gospel every minute of every day? And who among us can repeatedly forgive someone who offends us or who sins against us? Sure, we can usually manage to forgive someone once or twice, maybe even three times, but it surely is difficult to keep forgiving over and over again. These are hard things to do but they are possible through of the grace of God, the grace that God makes abundantly available to us through our faith, not because we deserve it, not because we have earned it but because God is God, and through our faith forgiveness will become part of our everyday life. We will be able to forgive without limit and we will be able to love unconditionally and this will not merit great reward because we will merely be carrying out the jobs that we have assumed as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The last teaching in today's gospel is difficult for a couple of reasons. First is the difficulty caused by use of the word "servant or slave". In the first century there was no problem talking about this because it was part of that world, but today most of us are uncomfortable with the concept of "servant" because it is not a part of our world. Even those of us who have employees or help around the house do not call them servants. And if your translation of the bible uses the word "slave" there is a larger problem because when we

think of slavery we think only of the slavery associated with the Civil War. In the first century slavery was natural over the entire known world and it could happen to almost any one but it had an end. The slave always expected that at some point he would begin to be able to purchase this freedom, usually after a period of about seven years but that doesn't apply to slavery in our own history. So before you can think about what Jesus is saying here you have to think about where he is saying it and try and work out a way to bring this into our context, into our time.

If you merely change the wording to read as if this work were someone's job, you miss the sense of compulsion to do the work, and that is why this is difficult to conceive for us today. We don't think that anyone has the right to compel us to work, the right to compel us to do anything. We believe that we have a right of self determination and we believe passionately that we should not have to do anything that we do not want to do. For the last two weeks PBS has been airing Ken Burns' documentary entitled simply "the war." I know that some of you have watched it, I watched much of it but some of it was just too painful to watch. But though there was something going on there, something that the film brought out that is directly connected with the gospel today. The sense of duty that America had during the war was immediately obvious. Millions in listed or were drafted, women took on jobs that have not been available to them before and kept the country moving, conscientious objectors filled their obligation to the country in other ways, children went door to door

collecting materials for the war effort. It was obvious that those people had a duty to something larger than themselves and it is that sense of duty that Jesus was speaking to in his words today. It sounds as if Jesus feels that the concept of duty is a godly concept, what we owe for the privilege of living in this world. The work that the apostles were given to do, the work that we have assumed in their stead, is our duty. There is no reward promised for doing our duty, we would like to have a reward, that's the way we like to work. If I do this then I will receive this, that is not what Jesus has promised us here. We have a task, we are to serve as examples for the world, we are to forgive unceasingly and be models of forgiveness, we have to go about our tasks of feeding the poor, clothe the naked, visiting the prisoners, taking care of widows and orphans, and were called to do this not to gain our salvation because we could never do enough to earn that. We are called to do this because we are humans and we live in this world and there are things that have to be done so that we can live in this world and so we can bring about a better world, we can help to bring about the kingdom of god, right here, right now.