

## Forgiving Faith

The Midlands area of our state boasts many restaurants; some of higher quality than others. At one particular eatery—which shall remain nameless—a diner became irate when his steak arrived undercooked. “Waiter,” he barked, “Didn’t you hear me say ‘well done’?”

“I can’t thank you enough, sir,” replied the server. “I hardly ever receive a compliment.”

A compliment. A thank-you. That’s not too much to ask, is it? For a server who’s brought you a beverage, taken your order, carried it into a hot kitchen, been yelled at by a temperamental chef, picked up your meal, carried it to your table on a heavy tray, refilled your glass, brought you extra bread, and then checked back with you to make sure everything’s all right?

Don’t we all like to hear a compliment and a word of thanks, when we have labored diligently? Is that really too much to expect?

Well. In this Sunday’s text from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that it *is* too much to expect. Jesus informs disciples that a

servant of his should *not* expect to be rewarded or even thanked for doing what he or she has been told to do.

Jesus illustrates his point with a parable about a servant who's been out toiling in the fields since sunup. A servant who has borne the noonday heat and the burden of the day. Then, after coming back to the house at dusk, this same servant is expected to cook and serve the master's evening meal, before having so much as a sip of cool water or a morsel of food. *And* the servant is expected to do all this without any thought of reward or thanks. What's up with that?

Sometimes Jesus' parables puzzle and perplex. Before he even gets into the servant story, Jesus has been talking about something else entirely: tiny seeds and huge trees. The connections aren't always easy to see. For a clearer understanding, it's helpful to consider the context of Jesus' words. To look at just what it is that he's responding to when he says those words.

So, to do that, let's rewind back to the beginning of today's reading.

Where we hear Jesus speaking to his disciples. To the twelve. And, of course, to you and me. Jesus is teaching on

forgiveness. About what you're to do when—not *if*, but *when*—a brother or sister falls short. And about what you're to do when the offense is against you yourself.

Jesus doesn't say: *It would be nice if you forgive*. Jesus doesn't say: *You ought to forgive*. Jesus doesn't say: *You should forgive*. No. What Jesus says is this: *You must forgive*. And just in case you didn't hear him the first time, he says it again: *You must forgive*. It's not a suggestion. It's a command. From Jesus himself. *Forgive!*

It sounds simple, this business of forgiving. But it's not easy. Because when we human creatures have been wronged, we like to *savor* these wrongs. Relish them. Dwell on them. Carry them around inside us. Where they eat away internally, causing damage and pain to the heart and to the spirit.

You know, I think those earliest disciples may have had some firsthand experience with the struggle to forgive. And they've concluded that the problem is they don't have enough faith.

So they ask for more. They ask Jesus for more faith. This request of those first disciples shows that they already know quite a bit about the nature of faith.

They know that faith isn't something they can attain on their own. They know that faith is not a work, but a *gift*.

And they know who to ask for this gift of faith. Jesus, who perfectly reveals the Giver. Jesus the Christ, who is both guide and companion on the journey of growing in faith.

They know that growing in faith is a process.

They know that faith doesn't come to a person all at once.

So it's not unreasonable that they would say to Jesus: *Increase our faith*. Isn't that *our* plea, too? Don't we feel the same way? When our Lord commands us to do something difficult—something as difficult as forgiving—are we not likely to react by making the excuse that our faith is inadequate and that we need more faith in order to do what he asks? We make the same request those first disciples do.

But Jesus says *no*. No to the twelve, and no to you and me. Jesus says: *You don't need any more. Because you've got mustard seed faith. And with that small kernel of mustard seed faith, you can tell a massive mulberry tree to pull up its deep roots and go jump in the ocean. And it does!*

Jesus uses this image to bring you to the realization that even with just a little faith, there's no limit to what you can do.

You can even forgive that other believer who's said or done something that hurt you. And if it happens again, and that person comes to you and says *I'm sorry*, you can forgive again. And again.

Because you and I have been forgiven for every hurtful thing we've ever done. And because Christ has forgiven us, we who bear his name are forgiving people. It's a cause-and-effect relationship: Because we have been forgiv-*en*, we are forgiv-*ing*. That's the sequence. Being forgiven comes *before* being able to forgive. We belong to Christ who forgives. Who, even on the cross, forgives. And so forgiving is what we do.

It's not easy. It's never easy. But it is what our Lord commands. You and I are not in charge. Our Lord is in charge. We live in obedience to him. He is the One we serve.

We're servants. We do what our Lord requires. And after we've done it, what Jesus wants to hear us say is: *There's nothing special about us. We did only what was expected of us. We did only what you have called us to do.*

In this story of a servant, Jesus' meaning is clear. We are not to go running back to him, saying, in so many words: *See*

*what I did? I forgave! Don't I deserve a thank-you? Don't I deserve a reward? Don't I deserve to be saved?*

Beloved, there is absolutely nothing you or I can do to *earn* salvation. We don't serve in order to be rewarded. We serve because we're people of faith. Mustard seed faith. Servant faith. Forgiving faith.

The authentic faith that Paul discerned in Timothy, to whom he wrote: "God...saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to [God's] own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ..."

This Christ who never fails to surprise us.

For on this World Communion Sunday—after you and I and all the rest of his servants around the earth come in from laboring in the fields of his kingdom—instead of having us continue to serve him, he invites: *Come...and take your place at the table.* And then *he himself* serves us. The Christ, who is among us as One who serves, offers the indescribable gift of himself. Not because we are worthy. Not because we have any merit in or of ourselves. Not because you and I have done or are doing any more than is expected of us.

It's through faith that you receive this holy mystery that is the body and blood of Christ. It's through faith that you're given this foretaste of the greatest feast of all. It's through faith that you're promised a place at a banquet table in a wondrous and everlasting realm. It's through faith that you're saved by the grace of the One who forgives.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.