

Eating Humble Plant

Well, the Sunday of the worthless servant parable is quite the way to begin a new ministry! Lest my head get too big before I even start serving as the new vicar here at St. John the Baptist, this parable keeps me in check...If we had to sum up the gospel in a sentence, we might say: It's not about you, it's about God and God's work.

But, because you might be curious, I will say a couple of words about myself: You will learn quickly that rambunctious black labs and anything miniature make my heart melt. I love audiobooks and podcasts and will likely refer to them in a sermon or twelve. I have been married to my husband Dan for five years, and we very recently (as of Friday, in fact!) welcomed four-year-old Charleigh to our home. And right now, as my family expands and I prepare for a new ministry and chapter of life, I find myself in a particularly reflective mood.

I doubt that I am alone in this. This is a time of year when most of us are especially reflective. Fall, with the end of summer and the beginning of the school year, is like a second January 1st. Whether we have young children at home or not, we all feel an increased sense of frenzy about our days. Vacations have drawn to an end, workplaces pursue their new goals in earnest, and the book clubs and other groups that took a summer hiatus resume their meetings. Churches too tend to change, whether they kick off a new year of Sunday School, introduce their stewardship campaign, or, as is the case here, celebrate Homecoming, welcoming back those who left for the summer or have found another parish home but nonetheless remain connected to this church family. Now offers an opportunity to take stock, in our congregation, in our families, in our careers: Where have we been? What direction are we headed? Who and how do we want to be?

The temptation can be simply to add more: churches add more events and programs, families add another activity to their calendar, offices and

organizations seek to show that their employees put in longer and longer hours. The disciples fell prey to this very seduction. "Give us greater faith," they begged of Jesus. "We need better, flashier, grander faith!" Jesus chastises them with what at first might seem to be a puzzling rebuke. He tells them that they do not need more faith, that they are missing the entire point. Faith is not something to flaunt or store up like money or achievements; rather, it is a quiet confidence in God's grace. This is why Jesus employs the example of the mustard seed to demonstrate that God works through all kinds of faith. A mustard seed, you may know, is tiny, only a few millimeters big. Faith makes possible otherwise unthinkable feats like transferring a firmly established tree to a foreign, unsuitable environment and watching the plant flourish, but faith has less to do with miracles than with relationship with God.

We might remember mustard seeds from Matthew's parables and our surprise that Jesus chooses this seed among all others. The mustard plant can prove pernicious and invasive; while we know and love it for its medicinal and culinary properties, once sown, it establishes roots and grows quickly. In other words, many gardeners may prefer to do without mustard seeds.

This story offers a humility lesson, no doubt. Whether compared to a weed or slave, we draw the same conclusion. We carry out God's mission because God expects us to do so, not because we are exceptional or especially important. Or perhaps we might say that we are exceptional and especially important, but such must be said about every single one of us. Remember that our specialness comes from God, and only from God. With this parable, Luke clearly sides with Paul in the faith versus works debate: God loves us not because of what we do but because God has chosen to love us always and forever. God's grace saves us from ourselves and frees us to do divine work because we no longer concern ourselves with how many points we are tallying for our entrance into heaven or how

impressively our resumes present. We simply give ourselves over to God to seek love and justice in this world, fiercely and without abandon.

Elizabeth Gilbert, the author whom you may know from the ever-popular *Eat, Pray, Love*, distinguishes between the martyr and the trickster when it comes to creativity. Whereas many contend that suffering and angst produces art, Gilbert argues that we should instead follow the path of the trickster. According to Gilbert, “The trickster (represented forever in world mythology as the fox, the crow, the coyote, the monkey) sees through our delusions of seriousness and exposes the play underneath all our drama. The trickster says, “You are welcome to die for your cause if you really want to, but I’m not here to spend my life suffering.”¹

The same could be said of faithful living. Like the disciples, we may think that the harder and more painfully we slog along in our work, the more God owes us. In the most basic sense, the parable of the worthless servant makes the point that we can do nothing outside or beyond of God’s expectations for us, but viewed positively, this text also makes the case that we are God’s co-workers. We may be tricksters, concerned with partnering with God to allowing the Spirit to blow us where she will. We commit ourselves to the process rather than the end result, for we seek not a reward at the end but an evermore intimate relationship with God.

Indeed, one of the gifts of small churches lies in their tendency to focus on the doing and the being rather than an end result. As your senior warden Bettie Hutcherson has said, St. John the Baptist is a “small but mighty” parish. When I first learned about this congregation, I was impressed by your ability to keep front and center that this church is about serving God and building the kingdom, not about serving the church. It can be easy to forget that the church exists for Christ’s and not its own sake.

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External markers, such as numbers of people in the church pews, Bible studies offered, and average pledges, can be a powerful signs of God's work, but they never tell the entire story. Sometimes we overlook the other places that God shows up, in the tiniest but mightiest of packages: mustard seeds, the faith of a small child who comforts her terminally ill mother with her favorite stuffed bear, the homeless man who feeds his dog before taking food himself.

If we remember that Jesus only asks that we trust, and God takes care of the rest, we will find all the strength and resourcefulness and hope that we need. I cannot wait to see how God comes alive in our ministry together.

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God-- whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did-- when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 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.

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 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!'"