Sunday, October 7, 2001
DUTY AND FAITH
Luke 17:5-10

One day the disciples said to Jesus, “Increase our faith.” That sounds like a legitimate request. What was behind their asking for an increase in faith at this point in their spiritual journey we do not know. Were they asking for a stronger belief in the overall goodness and mercy of God so that they could be more loving and forgiving toward others? Or maybe, as the opposition toward Jesus was growing, they wanted to be sure that their decision to follow him was the right one? Then too, they might have wanted reassurance that life in this creation has meaning and purpose. Or maybe it was more directly and consciously related to every aspect of their lives. We can only guess at their motivation, but for some reason or another, the disciples, like most of us, felt a need for an increase in their faith. There certainly have been numerous times in my life when I’ve felt my faith was lacking.

But how do you increase your faith? How do you expand it? Is there some quick fix or magical way to do it? How did Jesus respond to the disciples’ request? First of all, he acknowledged their lack of faith. He said, “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.”

Then he told them a story. Here’s my version of that parable: “Suppose you had a faithful worker who did his work responsibly and faithfully every day. He is honest and trustworthy even when he works without supervision. He doesn’t take extra coffee breaks, or take a nap. Part of his job description is to prepare the evening meal for you. So when he is finished with his regular work and comes to your house to finish his day’s work by preparing the evening meal, you do not say to him, ‘Come and sit down and have supper.’ His job is not yet done. He has to prepare the meal and then eat his own supper.”

Then Jesus asked this rhetorical question: “Do you give your employee a special reward for doing what he is supposed to do? No!”

Then he added this postscript to the story and directed it especially to the disciples. He said, “The same should be true of you. When you have followed my teachings and have done your duty in carrying out your ministry, some other kind of extra reward is not necessary, so don’t expect any. Being faithful in doing your duty is a reward in itself.”

In addition to increasing our faith, there are several lessons we can learn from this parable.

This parable is especially important for us to hear in these days when too many people believe that they deserve extra rewards and credits for doing what they are supposed to do. There are followers of Jesus who even anticipate an extra bonus for living the life God expects them to live. Some people think they should be given a special commendation for being responsible, moral human beings, for living an honest, upright life.

In fact, to some people, “duty” has become a bad word. This parable is saying just the opposite — that duty is a good word, and that there is a deep sense of satisfaction that comes from doing your duty or even going beyond what is expected of you, with no extra reward in mind.

Do you remember some years ago when Cal Ripken Jr. exceeded the record of Lou Gehrig for the number of consecutive baseball games played? He did so not for the acclaim he would

receive or to set a new record, but because he loves playing baseball and it is his job. Not long after that, he missed playing a game on purpose so that people would know that he was not playing to set a record.

Think of the countless people who, day after day, show up for work on time and do their jobs to the best of their ability, expecting no special reward — the secretaries, the office workers, the custodians, the file clerks, the factory workers, the nurses, the teachers, and so many others.

I've been impressed, as you have, with the thousands and thousands of people who are helping in a variety of ways since the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. These people are giving of their time, their abilities, and their money — not for any special recognition. They do not expect any reward or recognition. The same is true, of course, of the many firefighters, police officers, and numerous other people who have risked their lives and lost their lives in doing their duty. The real heroes and heroines of this world are those people who faithfully do their duty, day after day after day. Sometimes their work makes the headlines because of extraordinary circumstances, but more often, it does not make the headlines.

This story from Luke's gospel tells us that "duty" is a good word and that there is a deep sense of inner satisfaction that comes from doing what God expects of you.

That's what I appreciate about the people who donate their time for Habitat for Humanity and other types of action programs. Participants don't receive cash bonuses. Volunteers work long hours without pay. They don't expect any special recognition. They would say what Jesus said at the conclusion of this parable: "We are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty."

So the first point of this parable is this: doing what God has equipped you to do — doing your duty faithfully in your family, in your daily job, in your volunteer work — is a joy in itself. No special reward is necessary.

Lest you misunderstand, the parable is not saying that we who benefit from your faithfulness in doing your duty should not express our gratitude. Telling people "thank you" is always appropriate. The point is that in doing your duty faithfully, you are not doing it because of the reward or gratitude you hope to earn or receive. You do it because it's the right thing to do.

In a congregation like this one, Sunday Church School teachers, choir members, ushers, TV volunteers, greeters, board and committee members, volunteers at the reception desk, and many others serve in a responsible manner — not because of any special reward they are expecting or for the recognition they hope to receive, but for the inner satisfaction of knowing they are doing what God expects them to do. The same is true for countless community volunteers, those who work on the United Way, deliver "meals on wheels," and work as volunteers in hospitals and all kinds of service agencies.

An important requirement in our Confirmation curriculum is that each student work a certain number of hours in various service projects. This ties directly to the request the disciples made of Jesus, which caused him to use this parable.

The parable tells us that there is a direct relationship between doing your duty and increasing your faith. Most of us think of Mother Teresa as an individual who always possessed a strong faith. However, her writings reveal that many times she experienced a lack of faith. Sometimes she wondered whether or not God existed. How did she increase her faith? By doing her duty.

She said that her faith would begin to grow strong again as she took care of the sick and dying. The more she worked among the poor, the stronger her faith became. In other words, the more you put your faith into action, the more it will grow.

This shouldn't surprise us. It's true in many aspects of our living. The more you use your muscles, the stronger they become. If you do not use them, they atrophy.

Henri Nouwen, a priest, teacher, writer, and caregiver, testified to the same principle. He said his faith increased the most in the later years when he was taking personal care of a man. Here's how he described it:

"Adam cannot dress or undress himself, cannot walk alone, cannot eat without help. He does not cry or laugh. Only occasionally does he make eye contact. His back is distorted. His arm and leg movements are twisted. He suffers from severe epilepsy, and despite heavy medication, sees few days without grand-mal seizures. Sometimes, as he grows suddenly rigid, he utters a howling sound. On occasions, I've seen one big tear roll down his cheek."

"It takes me about an hour and a half to wake Adam, give him his medication, carry him into his bath, wash him, shave him, clean his teeth, dress him, put him in his wheelchair, and bring him to the place where he spends most of the day with therapeutic exercises."

Nouwen, who took care of Adam for a number of years, died several years ago. He had moved from his teaching position at Harvard University to a community called Daybreak near Toronto, to take on the daily mundane chores just described.

Nouwen claims that he, not Adam, was the chief beneficiary in this unique relationship. From the months, days, and hours spent with Adam, Nouwen said that he had gained an inner peace so fulfilling that other tasks seemed boring and superficial by contrast. Nouwen's faith increased through the doing of his daily duties.

Nouwen's experience reminded me of a reporter who wrote, "My career as a journalist has afforded me opportunities to interview diverse people. Looking back, I can roughly divide them into two types: stars and servants. The stars include NFL football greats, movie actors and actresses, music performers, TV personalities, and the like. They are the people who dominate our magazines and our television programs. We fawn over them, poring over the minutiae of their lives — the clothes they wear, the places they go."

"Yet," this reporter went on, "I must tell you that in my limited experience, these 'idols' are as miserable a group as I have ever met. Most have troubled or broken lives and use psychotherapy or drugs or both."

"I have also spent time with servants. People like Dr. Paul Brand, who worked for 20 years among outcasts — the poorest of the poor, leprosy patients in rural India — or relief workers in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, or other such places of world-class suffering. They work for long hours, low pay, and no applause, 'wasting' their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated, but somehow in the process of losing their lives, they have found them."

The reporter went on to say, "I was prepared to honor and admire these servants as inspiring examples. I was not, however, prepared to envy them. They have received the peace that is not of this world."

The reporter could've added, "If you would ask them, they would say what Jesus had the servants say at the end of his parable, 'We have only done what was our duty.'"

This parable is also a story that describes God's grace. God's love is not earned. It is not a reward for your doing your duty or your goodness. It is freely given. It is God's nature to love. If you are doing what God expects you to do in an attempt to earn God's favor, you have misunderstood the nature of God and the nature of love. Love that is given as a reward is not love. On the other hand, you might be inspired to do what God expects you to do because you already know that God loves you. To know that is enough. Amen.