

Our Duty and Our Delight

Luke 17:5-10

I am the oldest child in my family, and the first grandchild on my mother's side. Perhaps because of that, I have a strong sense of duty. Duty is my middle name, not a four-letter word. It's a virtue that I value very highly. Duty drives me to put in the hours and get the work done. I don't find it easy to relax. I'm often fidgety, always alert, on the lookout for things that have to be done. Life is very serious.

But there's a downside to duty alone. It has driven me to the point of exhaustion. It has drained my life of joy and playfulness. It has meant missing the beauty of the moment because I'm too preoccupied with all the tasks I need to complete. And it can easily tip over into resentment, a hardness of heart and an attack of self-pity.

Perhaps like me, there have been times in your life where you have operated on duty alone, whether in your family relationships, your marriage, at work, or even in your relationship with God. You've done what must be done, what you know to be right, even if you haven't felt any joy or fulfilment. And you can keep this up for a time, until you run out of puff, and it comes crashing down, and threatens to crush you. Your heart is empty, your will is shot, and you want to stop.

I've certainly known times like that in my ministry, I'm ashamed to admit. I've kept on preaching, teaching, caring, talking, counselling, but inside there has been a lack of joy. It has taken a bottoming out for me to realise that duty alone is not enough. Delight in God is the foundational truth for a disciple.

Today Jesus speaks to his disciples about duty in connection with living together in Christian community. He teaches them about some of the difficulties that disciples have getting one with one another. We are called to set an example of faith, hope and love to one another, especially to those Jesus calls the "little ones," both the children and young people in our community, but also those young in the faith, as well as those who don't have a high profile. When we ignore others because we think they're not worthy of our time, or we allow our anger to flare, or we exhibit a significant character flaw, we hurt the faith of others.

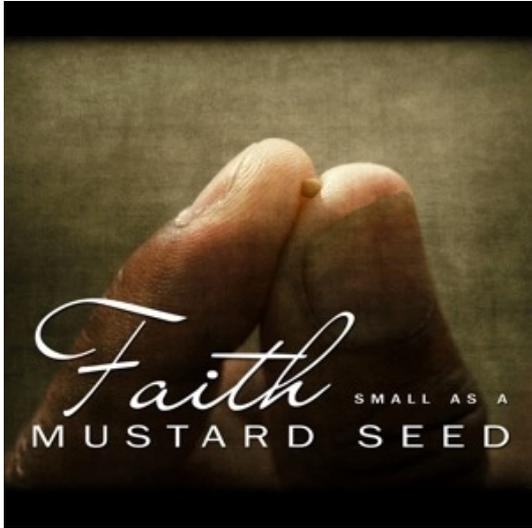


What Jesus says next is even harder. "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive." Most of us are quite comfortable privately acknowledging our own sin before God, in confession, but it's a much harder call to hold others accountable in love. This goes against the cultural grain. Other people's lives are their business. We shouldn't judge. But as far as Jesus is concerned, our brothers and sisters in Christ should matter

as much to us as they matter to God. When we see another person's spiritual health at risk, love, and Christian duty, compels to call it out and encourage them to call on God in repentance.



And this is where today's gospel begins. "The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'" I'm not surprised. They're nervous. Living this way is too hard! We don't have the capacity to live like this. You're asking the impossible!



Let's look carefully at Jesus' reply: "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." Do you think the disciples found this reply encouraging, or crushing? I'm sure that Jesus' intention was to challenge them to fully appreciate the gift of faith God had given them. The way Jesus phrases the question shows that Jesus knows they do have faith. Jesus is actually saying to them, "You do have faith, faith in me, and you have enough to live as a faithful disciple. Look at what you've already been doing: "They departed and went through the villages,

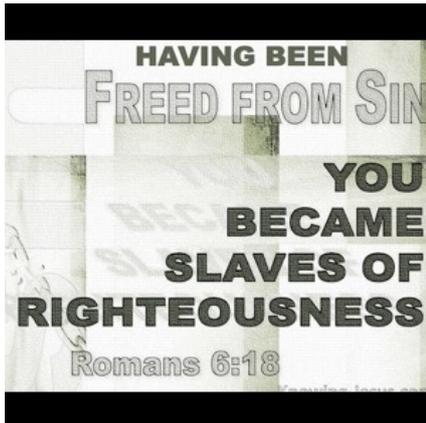
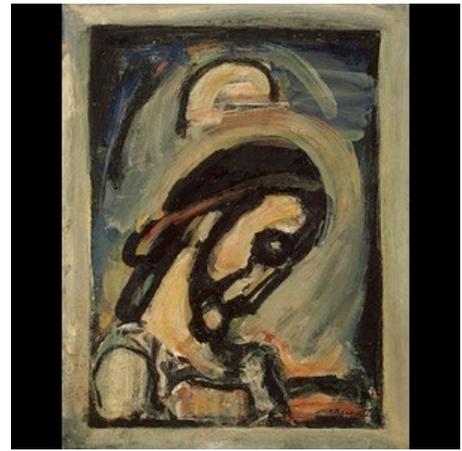
bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere." And when they came back to Jesus, they reported breathlessly, "Lord, in your name, even the demons submitted to us."

Jesus is inviting them to reflect on the difference faith and trust in him has made to their lives. From a rag-tag bunch of fishermen, tax collectors, political activists, nobodies, Jesus has shaped them into his chosen messengers. The process wasn't finished yet, though. There was so much more that they needed to learn. They called Jesus Lord, Messiah, but they didn't yet know how that confession of faith was going to change their hearts and lives.

Some time later Jesus himself will do exactly what the slave he talks about in verse 8 does: "Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink." Jesus arranges to share the Passover meal with his disciples. During the meal, he takes off his outer robe and wraps a towel around him. He is dressed to serve, and he, their Lord, washes his disciples' feet. It's an act of love that they would not have seen coming. They were stunned. This was their job, not his. But Jesus has a point to make: "Do you know what I have done to you. You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you... servants are not greater than their master."



When Jesus talks about the duty of each disciple, each slave, we need to hear these words in the light of Jesus' love. His love gets even deeper, gutsier. Jesus is stripped of his robe and led to his death on the cross. The Master becomes the servant. His desire is to do the will of his Father. That's all that matters, and his Father's will is to love the world so much and to give his one and only Son to bring reconciliation, new life, hope and renewed purpose. Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself, and became obedient to death, even death on a cross." This was his duty, true, but this was also his delight.



Jesus' cross and resurrection is also our joy, and our delight. And through his dutiful and loving obedience God has changed our lives for the good. Paul writes in Romans 6: "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin... you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." We swapped one form of service for another, but we now have a master who doesn't want to kill and destroy us, but one who wants us to live life to the full. And a full life, paradoxically, means a life of faith in which we spend ourselves for the sake of others.

I love the way that Martin Luther describes how faith fills us with joy and purpose. "Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. And so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. It does not ask whether there are good works to do, but before the question rises, it has already done them, and is always at the doing of them." Faith quite literally does the impossible, changing hard hearts to servant hearts, adding to duty, delight because in our service we are imitating Jesus and bringing honour to our Lord and Master. That's the kind of life I want to lead. I do want to do what God has commanded. I want to do it out of love and thanks, not fear and obligation. I know I'm not worthy of the love I've been shown, but my worth is seen in the love God poured out on me." As Paul reminds Timothy today, "God saved us and called us with a holy calling."



Sometimes that's easy, and sometimes it's difficult. Jesus talks of slaves ploughing and tending the sheep, serving at the table. All of these are biblical images of the work God calls each one of us to do: preparing spiritual ground in others and sowing the seeds of faith, caring for all God's people, and the lost sheep too, making sure that the hungry are fed, physically and spiritually. This is our duty, that's true. But faith in God, and responding to the love of God, "with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us," makes it our delight." Think about the specific acts of love God is asking of you; at home, at work, in your community, in this church. This is your duty, but it is powered by God's delight in you.

A few Sunday's ago I worshipped at my old school, Immanuel College, in suburban Adelaide. It was an Immanuel Old Scholars' weekend, and it was a great privilege to hear one of my seminary lecturers, Dr Vic Pfitzner, passionately preach the gospel, and Robin and Dorothy Mann lead the singing. But I was surprised what touched my heart the most. It was singing the *Worship Today* setting of the liturgy, one I had grown up with, the first home grown musical setting of our worship.

You might remember it. In the Preface, the congregation sang:

We lift our hearts with joy,
we lift them to the Lord.
We give you thanks, our God,
for that is right and good.



**Yes, it is truly good,
our duty and delight,
that we should
everywhere
and at all times
give thanks.**

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Our duty to God flows out of God's delight in us. Giving thanks starts in worship, but that's only the beginning. Life is the space where duty and delight work hand in hand. May you trust in the Lord and do good. May you take delight in the Lord. Amen.