

Luke 17:5-10

Our text for today includes yet another puzzling story told by Jesus to his closest disciples. He says (I'm paraphrasing here), If your servant came in from a hard day's work in the fields, would you ask him to sit down and be fed? No indeed. You would say, "Get to work. I need my dinner. You can eat later."

If we were expecting good news for the poor, I think we would be disappointed at this response. There is no rest for the weary in this particular story. But, as David Lloyd said earlier, Luke is probably descriptive, not prescriptive. That is, Jesus is simply describing the way many people are treated, then and now. I'm thinking here of my Dutch grandmother, who was pulled out of school after the 5th grade and sent to work as a domestic servant "because girls don't need an education" her father said. Today, it's the lot of many women who work a second shift at home after filling orders at McDonalds all day. Jesus seems to be saying "Don't expect any thanks or any breaks if that is your lot in life."

So what are we to make of this story?

I'm attending the current class on working with the lectionary in our School for Christian Growth. Last week, we did some digging into "difficult texts." Jacqie Wallen's sermon on "Being a Wise Steward" was cited as a good example of how one might go about unraveling the meaning of seemingly contradictory stories like this one and I was glad to follow her lead, so I looked up the scholarly interpretations as a way to start. They didn't actually help much.

But then I remembered Deborah's admonition: ask why the story is here, and not some other place, so I read all of Luke's chapter 17 and a light began to dawn.

The first line of this reading sets the scene: the disciples

demand of Jesus, “Increase our faith.” Jesus sidesteps their request with his answer: “If you had even a tiny bit of faith, small as a mustard seed, you could uproot this tree and plant it in the sea.”

Is he being sarcastic? Or just exaggerating to make a point? Surely the disciples have demonstrated that they have some faith or they wouldn't be following him around the country. And maybe that's the issue: Jesus wants them to have faith in God, not his miracle-working powers. He can't increase their faith. They must do it themselves—and they already have what it takes—faith the size of a mustard see.

As Luke tells it, Jesus moves from the “faith like a mustard seed” comment to the more troublesome story about hard-working field slaves who then must pull another shift to feed their demanding master with no thanks for just doing their job. Is that what the disciples must expect? Will that increase their faith? Would it increase your faith?

Our lectionary class has been a helpful reminder for me to suspend judgment and keep looking for the hidden gems here. Some of you know that I edit the weekly gospel reflections for the Church of the Saviour website, **InwardOutward.org**. Kayla McClurg started that website when she was the “point person” for Church of the Saviour after Gordon Cosby retired. When she died two years ago, the C of S Council decided to continue those reflections with a small group of writers from different CoS communities. When we don't have someone assigned for a week, I often use one of Kayla's reflections from her booklet, *Passage by Passage, Year C*. (You can order all three booklets from the InwardOutward website.)

In her reflection on this text, Kayla titles this story, **“Do what is ours to do.”** In other words, don't expect a reward for doing what is yours to do. The work is its own reward. Just do it because it belongs to you. That means, of course, that you need to know what your call is AND that you accept the servant

aspects of being in community – like unloading the dishwasher if you come early for a meeting, or turning off lights as you leave the building. It's the community dimension of our work. And in the context of our recommitment season, THAT seems like an appropriate message for us.

Seekers Church is a community based on call and gifts and ministry – by everyone! This is NOT a community where you can put your money in the collection plate and expect someone else to “do ministry” for you. If you are needing fame and acclaim for your efforts, this is probably not the right place for you. But if you are drawn to the life and servant ministry of Jesus, this might be exactly the right place to listen for call, put down roots in a mission group, and prune away the extra stuff that you don't need anymore. That's what will increase our faith!

Let's look at recommitment in light of simply doing what is ours to do.

Yearly commitment on the third Sunday in October has been a principle since the beginning of Church of the Saviour in 1947. Thirty years later, on Recommitment Sunday in 1976, Seekers began when 18 covenant members of Church of the Saviour committed to be the core of this church. Today, we call them Stewards. I hope you'll revisit the story, and look at the first and second versions of our call in the Appendix of *Stalking the Spirit*. It was not an easy road. The Council rejected our call the first time around, but Fred and Sonya pressed on because they believed in ministry in daily life. They adjusted the wording of our call as a church, and it was then accepted.

Joining Seekers as a member is not like joining a club, where you pay your dues and get access to something special. We ask only that you want to be intentional about your spiritual journey. That's all. As a member of Seekers, we expect you to show up regularly, apply yourself to the task at hand, and

contribute something to our common life. When you begin to care about the whole community, or find yourself critical of it, that might be the mustard seed of call toward becoming a Steward.

It's a truly humbling journey if we take it seriously. We all know we are supposed to love one another as Jesus loved his disciples, but most of us don't know how to do that. This is a place to practice, and be forgiven when we get it wrong. It takes real commitment to stay engaged when our culture provides so many addictive alternatives.

During this recommitment season at Seekers, we are encouraged to spend at least an hour pondering our relationship to this particular Body of Christ. If you are in a mission group, you have probably written about your questions, your doubts and certainties in your weekly spiritual reports. Underneath it all is the question posed by our scripture reading for today: What am I here for? And what is my work now?

When I first came to Seekers, I joined the Artist's Mission Group, because I was a professional potter then. We had no common mission except to run the little art gallery on the third floor of the CoS headquarters building at 2025 Mass. Avenue. Liz Vail, who painted that abstract painting over there (gesture), was a founding member of Seekers, and she got us interested in starting the Growing Edge Fund – which offers financial help for Seekers who are exploring some new “outward journey” expression.

Liz believed that money (and a prayer partner/advocate) could help people take a chance on something they might not otherwise explore. I'm happy to say that the Growing Edge Fund is now part of the Seekers operating budget, administered by the Mission Support Group, in case you are interested. As a sidenote, this podium, and the altar table, were made by John Schultz – who used Growing Edge money to explore his interest in woodworking when he retired from the federal government.

There is a list of Growing Edge recipients and their projects in the DRAFT copies of my history of Seekers which you can find in the library. [hold up]

In those early days, the School of Christian Living offered classes for all six of the small churches that formed out of Church of the Saviour in 1976, but it wasn't long before we noticed that the Tuesday night school was made up primarily of Seekers and the Thursday night school attracted people from the Columbia Road churches which clustered around the Potter's House.

By 1979, the Tuesday night school became a mission group of Seekers, and Emily Gilbert gave it the name, Learners & Teachers. When Peter retired from the Army in 1982, and we came back to Washington DC from Germany, I joined Learners & Teachers and have been there ever since. Every year, during recommitment season, I ask myself whether my call to continuing education has changed, but so far the answer I get in my prayer-time has been one of confirmation, that my call is to stay and support the school here at Seekers.

To be clear, continuing education at Seekers is not my only call, but it IS strong enough to keep me in Learners & Teachers rather than moving to another mission group. In the years when I was at Faith@Work, from 1985 thru 2007, I wished for a mission group that could support me in my primary outward mission, but Faith@Work already had a functioning board of directors and a national network of magazine subscribers, so it was not appropriate for me to have a mission group here.

From the beginning, Seekers attracted people (like me) who were "doing ministry" in some other institution as a paid vocation. What we needed from our church community was a place for reflection, a place to put down deeper roots in community for accountability and growth. I see the mission group as the place for intimacy and confession, for noticing my projections

and stretching to love the hidden parts of myself and others, so I can come to worship ready to hear where God is at work in the world through this congregation.

Most of the other Church of the Saviour communities began as a single corporate mission. Many of them have now become independent non-profits, with their own board of directors, their own fundraising efforts, and very little connection to the church. An example is Sarah's Circle, where Fern Edwards was the first director, and where Emmy Lu Daly used to live. It began as a mission group, and grew into a separate non-profit organization. You can see the remarkable list of non-profits that grew out of Church of the Saviour in each issue of CALLINGS.

Seekers took a different path. We claimed our identity as a church, not as a single mission. From the beginning, we have attracted people who bring a servant's heart to the institutions of this city. As our reflection paragraph from Jeremiah says, *(we are to) build houses to live in; plant gardens and eat what they grow. Seek the welfare of the city. Pray to the Holy One on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find yours.*

In closing, let me return to Luke 17, our text for today. It ends with these thankless words: "We have done only what we ought to have done." But the chapter goes on to tell of Jesus healing ten lepers on the road to Jerusalem, and only one came back to say thank-you, which sheds light on our text. Jesus is actually the servant here, doing what he was meant to do. Only one in ten would say thanks. The whole chapter is really about doing the work that we have been given to do, whether or not others approve or express gratitude. And then the chapter concludes with these words:

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say 'Look,

here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

May we have eyes to see the kingdom of God here and now as we do what is ours to do. That, Luke is suggesting, is the way to increase our faith.

Amen