

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 17:1–10

Sermon: “Humble Servants”

In our Gospel this morning we continue to hear Jesus instruct us in living out our Christian life. In the Old Testament Reading we have Habakkuk the late-seventh-century-BC servant staying faithful in his duty challenging the environment around him. In the midst of impending Babylonian destruction and widespread Israelite wickedness, God encouraged Habakkuk to remain steadfast in doing his prophetic duty. The Epistle continues the Pentecost season’s sharing of the Pastoral Epistles. Paul a servant the Lord’s servant who humbly did his apostolic duty now encourages Timothy (another servant of the Lord) to remain steadfast in the **“faith and love that are in Christ Jesus”** (2 Tim 1:13). Remaining faithful is the task put before also.

Everyone likes praise and recognition. Everyone likes a “way-to-go!” or a “high five” when achieving success. Everyone likes to be thanked for hard work. Whether it’s a cake-and-punch reception for “employee of the month” or coffee and donuts expressing appreciation for church volunteers, people like praise and recognition.

In our Gospel, Jesus waves a red flag against those craving praise and recognition. Instead of desiring appreciation for our efforts, servants of the Lord should say, **“We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty”** (v 10).

Why did Jesus wave the red flag? Because he knows his apostles. And he knows each of us. He knows the human condition: sinful pride by nature. Pride showed itself in wanting to be like God back in the Garden of Eden.

So Jesus waved the red flag not only to keep our sinful egos in check but also to destroy our pride and encourage us to follow him in his humility. A hard task sometimes.

Why did the apostles need a “humility reminder”? They needed a reminder because Jesus is calling them to service that will be very tough, even frightening, but might also become dangerously ego inflating.

Earlier in Luke, Jesus gave lengthy instruction to the Twelve centered on caring for the “little ones,” meaning the least, the lowly, the “tax collectors and sinners” (15:1). These “little ones” are those unlikely believers who trust in Jesus, in contrast to the arrogant Pharisees who felt no need to repent. Jesus exhorted his Twelve to care for these sinners who have died to their own attempts to justify themselves. And so he instructed the Twelve not to cause any stumbling blocks for these “little ones.”

Furthermore, he exhorted his Twelve to forgive constantly the sins of those who repent: ***“And he said to his disciples, ‘Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, “I repent” you must forgive him”*** (vs. 1–3). Remaining faithful also includes remaining forgiving to others.

The apostles, in response almost in so many words, said, “What you want us to do is tough! Give us power to do it! Increase our faith!” The apostles acknowledged that constant forgiving is tough.

Keeping repentant souls from stumbling is tough too. It was a terrifying call to service! But Jesus responded with words of encouragement. The apostles asked for more faith but Jesus says that they have enough faith. Faith, whether small or big, is a gift from God. God will give them the faith they need to accomplish these tasks.

Following instruction and encouragement, Jesus addresses a temptation to which the apostles and us might fall prey, the temptation of an inflated ego. This temptation is why Jesus gave the apostles a humility reminder: ***“Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant***

because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty''

(vs. 7–10).

Should the disciples find success in keeping believers from stumbling and in constant forgiving, Jesus told the Twelve they shouldn't feel they "deserve" any praise and recognition. They were doing what they had been called to do; they were doing what Jesus expected them to do. Indeed, Jesus humbled his apostles.

He beat down their natural human pride and sinful desire to feel that some celebration over their success should take place. No donut-and-coffee reception between services! No "apostle of the month" award ceremony for the apostle who forgave more sins than others.

Jesus reminds them that they are “unworthy servants,” that they have “only done what was [their] duty.” Those words apply to you and me as well.

At times, this call to humility is hard to accept. This call is hard to accept because we have a natural disposition that craves attention, a disposition that makes us covet the spotlight, makes us boastful and proud of all our successful accomplishments, whether accomplishments in our family, at our job, in our church, or in other vocations into which God places us. And, as it turns out, this calling is rather thankless.

We may feel that calling attention to our successes is justified because doing our duty is tough. After all, serving as a godly husband or wife in sickness and in health can be tough. Serving as faithful parents when adolescence pushes all our buttons can be tough.

Serving and being an honest employee or employer when temptation arrives to cheat the company or to cheat an employee out of time or money can be tough. Being a patient in our impatient world or being a widow or widower dealing with loneliness is tough. And aside from these examples constantly forgiving those who sin against us, as our Lord exhorts us in the Lord's Prayer is tough and it tests our compassion and love for others.

Yet Jesus encourages us as he encouraged the apostles. We have faith, which he gives us. Our faith rests on him, our Savior, who, on account of our natural disposition to inflate our pride, to call attention to our successes, took the punishment we deserved. He did his duty perfectly with humility, as the Father's obedient Servant.

By his perfect life and innocent death, Jesus absorbed the Father's divine punishment rightly directed at us. In our place, Jesus received the punishment we deserved.

Baptized into his death and resurrection, we no longer require recognition based on our success of serving in the challenging vocational responsibilities God gives us. Instead of coveting praise from others, we rest on Jesus' service for us, his taking our sin and death. Because we are in Christ, his humble service is the object of our faith. His serving, regularly served to us in the Lord's Supper, gives us strength to go about doing our Christian duty as God's humble servant, loving God and loving our neighbor, in the various vocations God gives us.

What if you are selected "mother of the year" or "volunteer of the month" or "most productive employee"?

Maybe the "employee of the month" parking spot is yours! Jesus doesn't say to shun these demonstrations of appreciation. Jesus' words instead instruct us Christians on how we are to accept gratitude.

We accept gratitude as servants, living in Jesus' service for us, servants who in response to God's love for us in Christ humbly say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty."

Amen