

## Just a Little Faith

### Year C, Proper 22 – Luke 17:5-10

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, October 2, 2016*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I have told you before that I've been reading, or rather listening to, a series of essays by C.S. Lewis. I know that has been a while ago, but it's a big collection. Anyway, this week, I came across a quote from one of Lewis' fellow authors and close friend, G.K. Chesterton, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found *wanting*," he said. "It has been found *difficult*, and left *untried*." Chesterton found that Christians, including himself, did not put their faith into action. But even the often curmudgeonly Chesterton made one exception. The one Christian Chesterton thought actually *lived* the Gospel was the one whose feast day we celebrate this week, Francis of Assisi, the saint who launched a million birdbaths and hundreds of thousands of garden statues, including one under a dogwood tree out back here, and the occasional service of Blessing of the Animals, like the one we will celebrate here next Saturday at 10. (plug)

Francis was the son of a wealthy textile merchant, and as such, part of the emerging Italian middle class. His father's wealth and Francis' own natural charisma made the young man a leader of the youth of his town, gaining him an almost a rock-star like following at the turn of the thirteenth century. Yet he remains famous today *not* because of his own words and actions, but because his words and actions conformed so closely to those of Jesus Christ.

As a boy, Francis dreamed of earning glory in battle. He got his chance at an early age when he enlisted, along with the other young men of Assisi, to fight in a feud against a neighboring city-state. Assisi lost the battle and Francis was imprisoned for a time. Defeat in battle, and serious illness in prison caused Francis to turn away from his visions of glory on the battlefield.

But rather than an all-at-once conversion, Francis' path took a series of turns, bringing him closer and closer to God. The course of Francis' life *was*, however, profoundly changed by at least two formative experiences. On a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis saw a beggar outside of St. Peter's Church, and felt moved by the Holy Spirit to trade *places* with him. Francis exchanged his clothes with the beggar and spent the day begging for alms. That experience of identification with those at the very margin of society shook the affluent young Francis to the core. Likewise, when his path brought him into contact with a man suffering from the still very contagious leprosy, rather than turning away, Francis reached out and embraced the man, perhaps the first human contact the outcast had had for much of his life. These two experiences, and the overwhelming certainty that they were driven by Christ's love taking hold of his heart, lead Francis to what his contemporaries would call a strong identification with the poor, and Francis cut himself off from the opulent lifestyle of his father, and sought out a radically simple life.

By the time of his death, the love of God had compelled Francis to accomplish much toward rebuilding the church. He could look on thousands of lives transformed by his call for repentance and simplicity of life. Yet Francis of Assisi was simply a man transformed by the love of God and the joy that flowed from a deep understanding of all that God has done for us.

"Increase our faith!" the disciples demanded. And Jesus replied, "Don't you know that the Father has already made available to you all the faith you will ever possibly need."

The disciples had seen all that could be accomplished with faith. They had seen Jesus heal the sick. They had seen him make the lame walk, and the withered whole. They had even seen him return the dead to life. Like any disciples, they wanted what their *master* had. They wanted the ability, the power that seemed to flow so effortlessly in and through Jesus to do... miraculous things. They wanted to know,

they wanted to understand the power of God to change the brokenness that they saw around them. They wanted to do the great things master did, and they wanted what he had that would make that possible.

“Don’t you know,” Jesus told the disciples that wanted to do great things, “that the Father has already made available to you all the faith you will ever possibly need.” “If you held onto even the smallest grain of the authority and power that you have been given, you could do literally *anything*.” “The real challenge,” he told them, “is finding the way, and finding the *will* to put your faith into action.”

One of the problems that we share with the disciples, those first followers of the Christ, is that we don’t see the tremendous gifts that we have already been given. Or, worse yet, we think that some of us have been given the responsibility to use those gifts and that that takes the rest of us off the hook. While I sure *hope* that it’s the case that the Church benefits from the ministry of priests and deacons, and *even* bishops, the real work of the Church happens when *all* the people live out their faith in their day to day lives. If we were all to put our mustard seed of faith into genuine action in the world, there wouldn’t be a *mulberry* tree standing, because they’d *all* be planted in the sea. As I said to you a couple of weeks ago, you have not only the commission but the *command* to make a difference in the world around you. *You* are the Balm in Gilead.

And then Jesus told his followers who wanted to make a difference, one of the oddest stories in the Bible. You know you think so, too, and that if I just let it lying there, some of you would be asking me about it after. “Who among you,” Jesus said to his disciples who had asked him to increase their faith, “who among you would say to your servant... ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table?’” “Do you thank the servant,” he asked, “for doing what was commanded?”

You see, Jesus knew that alongside the mustard seed worth of faith that his followers already had, that each of them had, that each of *us* have bushel *baskets* of weed seeds crowding in. We want to do the right thing, for all the right reasons, but envies and jealousies, prides and greeds, prejudices and contempts, and sometimes even indifference, claw and choke at the best that we have to offer, until despite our demand for an increase of faith, we find ourselves doing little to nothing at all. But we are not called to serve others for the thanks we get.

We are called to serve and to serve and to serve, because that is what Jesus himself has shown us to be the life of true blessedness in the Kingdom of God. We are not necessarily called to heal the leper – or the one with HIV/AIDS or HepC – but we *are* called to embrace him for the person that God has put in our lives to love. “So you also,” Jesus reminded all his disciples, “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.’”

This week we remember Francis, the Saint of Assisi, who probably embodied better than any of us will ever, what it means to be a genuine servant. And we come back around to another quote from my friend, G.K. Chesterton, who in addition to challenging Christians to actually *engage* the Christian life, also advised, “Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.”

We are not asked, Jesus tells us over and over again, to do anything for which we aren’t already *abundantly* equipped. Nor are we to seek in our service anything more than the service itself. We call ourselves servants knowing that what we do, we do for *love*, love for the one who knows us fully and loves us more than we could ever ask for or imagine, *and* love for the ones that he has set in our paths and in our lives. That love only take so very little faith, really. And in that love, in that love affair with all that God has given us, we are ever and truly blessed.