

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Master and Lord,
Jesus Christ, amen.

Today's Gospel reading is probably nobody's favorite story. It's known as the Parable of the unworthy slave. If all we read is the small snippet of the overall story it's also very misunderstood. Our reading starts with the disciples asking Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus responds by telling them if they had even a small mustard seed size of faith they could uproot a huge tree and replant it in the sea. Why do the disciples ask for more faith? This entire exchange between the disciples and Jesus can't be really understood without reading the 4 verses that come right before today's text. So, before we go any further, let's go back and read those first 4 verses of chapter 17...

Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!"² It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.³ Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.⁴ And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

This is the impetus behind their request to give them more faith. They are beginning to realize just how hard following Jesus is going to be. They can't just go about preaching repentance and forgiveness without actually practicing what they preach, especially around the little ones or those who are new to Christianity. If these little ones see a disciple preaching one thing, but doing the opposite it may cause them to question their newfound faith in Jesus. Woe to any disciple who causes the faith of a new Christian to falter. If that isn't hard enough Jesus continues by telling his disciples that if another disciple sins, they must rebuke the offender every single time he or she sins. To make it even harder, the Christian must forgive the offender if they repent, no matter how many times they sin. It's a tall order to live up to these demands. It's really hard to confront someone who is sinning. I feel like a hypocrite pointing out someone else's error when I have so many of my own... Not to mention all the possible ways the intervention could go so terribly wrong. Then there's the matter of forgiving them for the wrong they've done. I can forgive small offences pretty easily, but it's much harder when the offence is especially big or especially cruel or when it's been committed over and over. So, the disciples ask Jesus for more faith in order to do all he requires of them.

By making this request of Jesus the disciples assume what they need is more faith. They think they have some faith, but need more in order to measure up to

Jesus' challenge to confront and forgive those who have sinned. Jesus shatters their illusions about faith—even with their teeny tiny mustard seed size faith God can do the impossible. Like oh, maybe moving a huge tree and replanting it in the sea. The point is not that they need more faith, rather they need to understand faith enables God to work in a person's life in ways that defy ordinary human understanding. This saying isn't about being able to do miraculous works or spectacular tricks. On the contrary, Jesus assures the disciples that with even their tiny amount of faith they can live by his teachings on discipleship.

Jesus then launches into this parable of the unworthy slave. In this parable Jesus seems to be saying his followers, slaves of God, must do our jobs without expecting any hoopla, congratulations, or rewards. I don't know about you, but when I do my chores around the house and PJ notices my effort and thanks me, I feel good about what I've done. It motivates me to want to do more because I like to receive thanks. On the other hand, when I've done my chores and she doesn't notice or say anything, I get a little miffed... I remember reading the book titled *The One Minute Manager* a long time ago. The principles in that book have been applied broadly from the management of people at work to how to treat volunteers in the Church, to how to raise your children. The premise is simple, catch the subordinate, the volunteer, the child doing something right and reward them. You repeat this over and over until the person begins to feel good about doing things the

right way. It's not hard and it sure beats that whole confronting and rebuking and forgiving stuff... Apparently, Jesus never read the One Minute Manager... So, it's a little difficult to make sense of this parable on its surface.

Here's the point Jesus in making and why we shouldn't expect thanks and praise from God or anyone else for that matter. We can't live up to the demands of the commandments. We can't fulfill the spirit and intent of any one single commandment let alone all ten. So, the premise of our argument is faulty from the get-go. We can never do all we're commanded to do, even if we boil them all down to just the 2 commandments Jesus gave in the New Testament; to love God with our whole heart, mind, strength, and soul and to love our neighbor as ourselves. In our arrogance, when we do one or two righteous acts, we expect a blessing as if we're a totally righteous person. The problem with that line of thinking is there are no purely good people. We've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The only way we can do anything even remotely pleasing to God is through Christ Jesus our Lord. We are slaves and completely dependent on the power and the mercy of God. The Good News is through faith in God and by His grace, we can do the impossible. Those who do what is commanded do it through faith in Jesus Christ, not of our own merit, so that nobody can boast as if it were our own achievement. Some of us, myself included would benefit by remembering this... Even when we do good things, we're empowered to do them by God. So,

how can we expect to receive congratulations or that pat on the back for some good work when it's God, working through us really doing the good works? And another thing, where do we get off thinking we're such good people all the while leaving so much left undone? When we recognize our goodness is not of our own making, but because of the power of God's Holy Spirit living in us, rather than expecting a reward, a more appropriate response is to thank and praise God for working in and through us to accomplish His will on earth and it is in heaven.

Jesus came among us as one who serves and empowers his followers to continue serving in His Name. Today the Kingdom of God gained another servant, Crew Baker. I love Crew's middle name, Maine. With no offence to Jackson, Miles, or Ruby we finally got to the Maine event in the Baker family! I know God will do great things through His new servant. Today's lesson is such an appropriate reminder to all of us that we do have these "Little Ones" in our midst and trust me they watch everything we say and do. I for one don't want to be cast into the ocean with a huge millstone around my neck, so I pray the Holy Spirit will lead me and all of us to be good examples for Crew and for all the little ones in our care. When I pray the Lord's Prayer and ask for God's will to be done here on earth as in heaven and not to led into temptation I'm earnestly asking God's Holy Spirit to work through us to walk the talk of our Christian faith.

Let's pray... Lord God, none of us wants to lead your children astray. Since we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we put our trust in you to lead us in living our lives in ways that please you. When we stray, and we will, we trust in your love and mercy to forgive all our sins, no matter how many times we sin each and every day. Help us to be quick to forgive others who sin against us and against you. May our lives reflect your glory and may we all do what is commanded without feeling entitled to your praise or blessing, but rather giving you the honor and praise for working your deeds of power through us. Father in heaven, thank you for making us your slaves now and always, amen.