

2<sup>nd</sup> October 2016 sermon notes 2 Timothy 1:3,6-15 Luke 17:5-10

*The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.*"

This is according to G.K. Chesterton, who found many Christians did not put their faith into action.

But even Chesterton would agree there was a notable exception.

Francis of Assisi, was the son of a wealthy textile merchant. His father's wealth and Francis' own natural charisma made the young man a leader of the youth of his town.

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 neighbouring state. Assisi lost the battle and Francis was imprisoned for a time. Defeat in battle and serious illness caused Francis to turn away from his visions of glory on the battlefield.

Francis' path toward God took a series of turns closer to God, rather than an all at once conversion. However, the course of Francis' life was profoundly changed by at least two experiences. On a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis saw a beggar outside of St. Peter's Church. He was moved to trade places with the beggar. Francis exchanged clothes with a beggar and then spent the day begging for alms. That experience of being poor shook Francis to the core. Later he confronted his own fears of leprosy by hugging a leper. Like trading places with the beggar in Rome, hugging a leper left a deep mark on Francis. Shaped by his experiences with the beggar and the leper, he had a strong identification with the poor. Francis cut himself off from the opulent lifestyle of his father and sought a radically simple life. By the time of his death, the love of God had compelled Francis to accomplish much. He could look on thousands of lives transformed by his call for repentance and simplicity of life.

Francis approach to his life of Christian service fits with Jesus words to us in today's Gospel reading when tells those who follow him that they are to serve with no thought to reward *"Suppose one of you has a servant who is ploughing or looking after the sheep. When he comes in from the field, do you tell him to hurry along and eat his meal? Of course not! Instead, you say to him, 'Get my supper ready, then put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may have your meal.' The servant does not deserve thanks for obeying orders, does he? It is the same with you; when you have done all you have been told to do, say, 'We are ordinary servants; we have only done our duty.'"*

So when you come in from doing something for God, don't expect a reward, only more work. It's a wonder the crowds followed Jesus at all. But what exactly is the work of God? In what way are we to serve him? We have the example of Francis, to add to that of Jesus' own life and ministry. Yet, how can we in our own time and place attempt to live more fully into the Gospel?

We are all called to ministry. Then as ministers, each of us has a wide variety of jobs to do in the kingdom of God based on the gifts God has given us. The real work of the church happens when the people in the pews live out their faith in their day to day lives. This includes many thankless tasks, showing love and mercy in even small ways and even if no one notices.

You know how thankless these tasks are because you have the same issue at home. Do you get thanked every time you do the dishes? Or cut the grass? Or wash the laundry? Or make your bed? Or do your homework? Probably not. But permit time to pass without doing the dishes, cutting the grassing, washing the laundry, making your bed or doing your homework and you are sure to hear about it. These are thankless tasks and you take them on with no thought to getting praise for doing them.

Notice that in this reading, Jesus tells the story of the servant who does what he or she is supposed to do in response to the disciples asking for more faith. First he tells them the parable of the mustard seed and how the tiniest amount of faith is enough to accomplish great things for God. Then he goes on to describe the seemingly thankless task of serving God his Father. It is in serving God that we find our faith strengthened.

Now, how is this a response to the disciples' request 'Make our faith greater. What's this got to do with how much faith we have? With whether or not we need an increase in our faith?

How many of you here have ever wished you had more faith? Perhaps prayed to God asking to be given more faith? Yes, most of us.

And how many of you still hope you will yet have more faith than you have now? Still most. Me too. It's a perfectly normal thing to want.

It seems to me that what Jesus is saying here is that there's not much value in worrying too much about whether you've got enough faith or whether you could have more faith. The important question is, "Are you living faithfully with the faith you've got?" You see, living faithfully should not be a big deal. Every one of us was created in the image of God with an innate ability to know the difference between love and hate, between integrity and fraudulence, between faithfulness and treachery. Every one of us was created with the capacity for continual growth in love, truth, peacefulness, goodness, creativity and wholeness. Everyone of us should be able to be expected to live faithfully to that. Our basic faithfulness and integrity should be able to be taken for granted. It's what we were created for. It's what we are called to. It's just doing our job. It's not evidence of great big faith. A mustard seed's worth of faith is more than enough if you just live it faithfully. God and everyone else should be able to take us for granted on that one.

You want more faith? You want the kind of super-faith that will move mountains, that will enable you to command a mountain ash to be uprooted and planted in the sea? Well what are you doing with the faith that you've got? Are you living faithfully? Are you doing your job, doing the basics, acting justly, loving mercifully, and walking in simplicity with your God? That's just basic nuts-and-bolts humanity, lived out.

You have more than enough faith for these things. In essence Christian discipleship is not something extra, something special. It is nothing more and nothing less than living out the meaning of our humanity, growing into what we were created to become.

We are not to serve others for the thanks we get. We are to serve others as serving Jesus, because that is the life God calls us to, knowing that we will benefit more than the people we help. We will benefit in increased faith and increased love. Francis took his mustard seed of faith and used it to trust that he could hug a leper, though he was terribly afraid. In the process, he found the faith to work among lepers. And so, again and again, his steps of faith supported Francis to trust God more. It is the same for us. Each step of faith strengthens our trust in God to follow even more boldly.

To come back around to G.K. Chesterton, he advised, "*Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.*" That was Francis, living out a love affair with God. When it is us living into the love of God, then Christianity will have been tried and not found wanting, nor will it be a series of thankless tasks. To encourage one another and support one another in the living out of our mustard seeds of faith. Without that support it is easy for the flames of faith to be blown out in the storms of greed and callousness. We have to remind each other as Paul reminded Timothy in our other reading to rekindle the gift that is within you, for the Spirit that God gave you is not a spirit of cowardice but of power and love and self-control.

Walking the life of faith then is not done in search of thanks or praise, but is simply an act of love. Then you and I can join Francis in saying that we are merely servants doing what we were called to do. We call ourselves servants knowing that what we do, we do for love, for the one who knows us fully and loves us more than we could ever ask for or imagine. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. The mercies of God are never spent. They are new every morning, for great is the faithfulness of our God.