

Sermon: A Thankless Job

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

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Based on **Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Luke 17:5-10**

Habakkuk and Jeremiah were contemporaries in the late seventh century, and both prophets claimed that the Babylonian invasion was a divine judgement against Judah. But Habakkuk asked, is that fair? He received the answer that God is God and will, in God's own time, deal with the wicked. Until then and at all times, the righteous will live by faith.

In his oracle – his vision – Habakkuk cried out to the LORD, 'Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?' In every age, it seems, people instinctively look the other way when bad things happen. Unless it's a car crash on the Expressway at rush hour – in which case, we, like Habakkuk, usually look in spite of ourselves.

Habakkuk's problem was that he was compelled to witness wrong-doing and trouble and comment on it, all the time. Then the LORD said, write this down; there's another vision coming, one which speaks of the end. And God said be patient, wait for it. Have faith.

And there it is.

We know faith to mean trust and reliance on God but how much do we need, because the righteous will live by faith.

Deep down inside, each of us may be wondering if we're righteous at all; do we have enough faith; are we good enough? In the times we live in, these are not trivial questions, and people have been asking them for thousands of years.

Is faith like buying wine when you know nothing about grapes? Red or white? French or Californian? Box or bottle? And what goes best with fish?

Or is faith like art? Is art an investment to put in storage? Do I put things on my wall that I like, or am I trying to impress people? Should I buy a poster to put in a nice frame or original art by a local artist I know? How much should I pay for a painting of dogs playing poker? But it's on black velvet.

When it comes to faith, will I know it when I see it, so to speak?

How can I, a sinner, know anything about it?

Now, we must admit that the parable about the master and the worthless slaves is something of a showstopper for a lot of people.

There is a dangerous undertone here for anyone who has ever known themselves to be held in low esteem. It's easy to use this parable as a way to put people down and keep them down. Can we honestly expect people to think of themselves as worthless because someone else said so? Some do.

This passage becomes a problem only if we begin to separate our faith from Jesus. It becomes a problem if we think about our faith as *our* faith.

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" This demand didn't just come out of the blue. In verse one, Jesus said to them, "Things that cause people Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone *by whom* they come (17:1)!"

He told them that "if another disciple sins, rebuke them; and if they repent, you must forgive them (17:3b)."

The thought of bearing this kind of responsibility may have prompted the apostles' request for more faith, and why not? But Jesus assured them, "If you had faith even *as large as a mustard seed*, the smallest seed in the known world, then you could rearrange the landscape."

Since they were already followers of Jesus, as are we, the assumption is that they *already* had some faith, they had put their trust and reliance in Jesus, which makes it a Christian faith. But by asking for *more*, they showed their understanding that faith is not theirs but is given by God. Faith is the work of the Holy Spirit working through us; it comes to us by our reliance on God and not on ourselves.

So, knowing their responsibilities to their brothers and sisters in Christ, the disciples believe they're going to need some more help, and so they ask for it. Fine, said Jesus, but who among you would invite your indentured servant to join you for dinner?

This is where people think Jesus is getting a bit off track.

We all act according to the ways of the prevailing culture, and the master sharing dinner with the slave is not the norm. But *everything* Jesus does goes against the prevailing culture. He invites everyone – tax collectors, sinners, us – to his Table.

In verse 10, when Jesus says, "So you also say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" know that no one is worthless. Jesus is speaking only of the conventional, expected, prevailing culture.

In fact, in John's Gospel, Jesus called the disciples friends (15:13-15).

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus consistently reconciles and rebuilds the faith community, a community that *welcomes* the repentant, the poor, the weary, the spiritually wounded and physically broken people that we all recognize from our own lives.

He said, "I am among you as one who serves" (22:27). On the night he was betrayed, when he knelt before each of them and washed their feet (John 13), he wanted us to know how to kneel and to serve, and then to take our tiny faith and aspire to do great things.

Habakkuk's vision that 'The righteous live by faith' is the center of his theology, and it seems simple enough, like saying, 'God is love.' But there is a whole lot more behind this thought. The sixteenth-century Reformation turned on the meaning of this one phrase. Martin Luther had a lot to say about it, as did John Calvin and many others.

The scholar Joseph Fitzmyer wrote that "The amount of faith is not important, but the kind of faith is, i.e., genuine faith. If it were no bigger than a grain of mustard, yet genuine, it would have wondrous power."¹

The artist Julia Cameron wrote that "Most of us never consider how powerful [God] really is...We unconsciously set a limit on how much God can give us or help us... And if we receive a gift beyond our imagining, we often send it back."²

We are all God's servants, and we are all expected to be ready when called. We are expected to keep watch to *see* what God will *say* to us. God's words will come to us through God's actions in the world, so we must keep watch, to stand on the rampart, if you will, because we don't want to miss it.

In the end, faith cannot be measured; it can only be lived. And having any faith at all means we have already ruled out the impossible.

Amen.

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke X-XXIV*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1142.

² Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002), 91.