

Receiving Grace

A Sermon on Luke 17:5-10 by the Rev. Philip Major
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We gather together, seeking to be in the presence of the one who created us out of love, and for the purposes of love. God intends for this love to be in the center of our lives. God intends for this love to be the beginning, the middle and the end of our journeys.

Yet we struggle. We struggle to know God's love. We struggle to live in God's joy. We struggle to let God's hope be our guide.

Sometimes I notice I am approaching the struggle with what you might call the 'Avis approach'. Back in the olden days, before my kids were born, the Avis Rental Car company used a slogan in all of their advertising, "We try harder." Sometimes, when I am feeling distant from God, I unconsciously begin to follow 'the Avis approach'. I just try harder. I work harder at the things that are on my agenda of things to do and get done. This doesn't seem to help very much. I work harder and harder in the wrong direction, and eventually I realize I am struggling.

In today's Gospel, Jesus' disciples also seem to be struggling. The disciples are struggling with the challenges that have been set before them. In response, they say, *Increase our faith! The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea.' And it would obey you.* Jesus responds sharply because the disciples are making some fundamental mistakes in their pursuit of the spiritual life.

When the disciples say, "Increase our faith." Jesus says, "The fact that you are asking me to increase your faith reveals you are headed in the wrong direction." "When you say this it reveals you aren't speaking the language of faith." The disciples are approaching faith as something they might possess or master.

Faith is not a set of practices that one learns and then masters. Faith is not a human accomplishment. Faith is a relationship of grace between us and God.

It is difficult to fully understand or describe any relationship, let alone a relationship between us and God. One of the gifts of the Gospel of Luke is that there are many positive depictions of faith. Through these stories we can assemble a picture of what it looks like for us to be in a relationship of faith with God.

Consider, for example, the very next story in Luke. It is the story of the ten lepers who were healed. The point of the story of the ten lepers is that faith is a relationship of gratitude. The disciples are acting out of fear, desperation and greed, which are the opposite of gratitude. The disciples need to head in the opposite direction, which is away from fear and desperation, and toward a relationship of gratitude with Jesus and with God.

In Luke we see Jesus and the angels of God coming to people and engaging them in conversation. So a relationship of faith is a relationship where we devote significant time to listening. The importance of listening to God's voice in our lives, as opposed to being preoccupied with our agendas, is the central message of the story of Mary and Martha.

At the same time, a relationship of faith with God changes our relationships with other people. Our relationships with God lead to merciful, compassionate relationships with other people. The story of the Good Samaritan and the story of the Prodigal Son point to the fact that a relationship of faith with God strengthens our capacity to act with compassion and mercy.

Especially through the Gospel of Luke we understand that our relationship with God is not a matter of us being part of the right religious group, or being part of the right nationality. These relationships of faith are not restricted to men or restricted to women, and are not based on whether we are rich or poor.

Our relationship of faith with God is not based on any of these human characteristics. According to St. Paul our relationship of faith with God is based on grace. This means that God freely offers us this relationship.

God is constantly offering us this gift. Our job is to accept God's generous offer. We receive God's grace when we make space for God to speak in our lives and be present in our lives and work through our lives. That's actually a lot of space.

The only way for us to make this sort of space in our lives is to let go of something big and significant. We have to let go of a part of ourselves that is taking up a lot of our time and energy and is contrary to God's work of love. We make space for God in our lives when we let go of our harsh judgments and our pride.

Letting go of our pride is the point of the parable of the master and the servant. At the end of the parable Jesus says: *So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, should say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'* We have to let go of our pride, of our feelings that we are entitled. This is directly connected with what Mary said, back in chapter one: "God has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts."

God freely offers us a relationship of faith. This is not something we achieve. It is a gift. In order to receive it we have to make room in our lives for God. We have to quiet our restlessness and be still so we can know God's presence. We have to quiet our own voices. We have to lower the volume on all of the entertainment and distractions that surround us. Then we may hear God speaking to us.

In this relationship of faith God does God's part, then we must do our part. So there is an interaction of God's will and our wills. That's what makes it a relationship.

This is God's desire: to be in a relationship with you. This is God's desire: for you to make a quiet place in your life where you might see God's work and hear some of what God is saying. This is God's desire: for you to be dwelling in that sacred space where love is the only purpose.