

I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

There are many parts of scripture that assert each of our individual worth as beloved children of God. God calls us into community with one another and constantly works through the unexpected, filling the hungry with good things and affirming that He will provide for us. We can go to the scripture for comfort when we feel lonely, afraid, or lost.

“We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.”

Well... maybe don't read Luke 17:5-10 if you are looking to be comforted.

Many parts of the Bible that assert our inherent value and worth, but perhaps not this particular passage.

St. Paul writes to Timothy, “Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God.” While these words would make an excellent inspirational poster or needlepoint pillowcase, it seems to be a tall order.

Hearing today's lesson, initially, I feel unprepared to defend their inclusion in our canon should any skeptic challenge their worth. The prized Jerusalem lays abandoned and weeping, yet God does not rescue her, but rather "the Lord has made her suffer for the multitude of her transgressions." We see what this pain leads to in today's Psalm, where the Psalmist is so distraught that he might even take sadistic delight in the slaughter of children. And turning to the Gospel, Jesus commands us to see ourselves as worthless slaves.

If this is the testimony of our Lord, I might need a little more than St. Paul's assurance before relying on the power of God.

Yet St. Paul is right, it is possible to "serve God with a clear conscience" even when confronted with texts that we would rather eschew for more benign teachings on pastoral scenes. In order to do this, we must not gloss over the uncomfortable—and even offensive—parts of scripture, but face it head on.

When we do not flee from, but rather engage with challenging scripture, we are drawn deeper into our relationship with God. We submit to scripture, but this submission does not mean bringing a delicacy to scripture or leaving our discomfort unexamined, but rather we grab scripture, dig through it, and with all our will and all our faith explore scripture to find how God works through our discomfort, and works through us.

So, Our Lord addresses his apostles, asking them about the way they treat those who serve them. “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table?’”

This question is framed in such a way that we know the answer. Of course, we don’t invite those who serve us to sit down and join us. We frequently take for granted the labor of others, not appreciating all they do to keep our lives secure.

Listening to this, we think we know where Christ is going. We were prepared for this moment after reading the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus last week. Clearly, Jesus is going to once more remind us that we have no authority to exercise our power over people. We should not be haughty, but invite everyone to the table.

That would make a very lovely sermon, but that is not what Christ says in this teaching. Instead, Christ shifts the attention from our behavior towards people to our relationship with God.

The disciples, and I think we can say ourselves, are taught to say “we are worthless slaves, we only have done what we ought to have done” even after working tirelessly for God. This reminds us that God does not invite us into the Kingdom because of our good works.

But Jesus teaches his disciples to proclaim their worthlessness, not as some cruel hazing process or attempt to humiliate us. Nor is he suggesting that there is something divine or redemptive about the institution of slavery. Any reading of this passage that seeks to degrade human life or assert a socio-economic hierarchy is dangerous. The goal is not to shame us into submission, but rather to proclaim the good news. To find the good news, let's take a step back and bring in the other teaching we heard today. The similitude of the mustard seed.

The lectionary selection from Luke's Gospel pairs two seemingly different teachings. We have first the teaching of the Mustard Seed and then the teaching of the unworthy slaves. Unlike the parallel teaching on faith in St. Matthew's gospel, which addresses the disciple's inability to cast out demons, demonstrating a deficiency in faith, St. Luke's teaching on faith responds to the disciples' desire to increase their faith for the spiritual tasks ahead.

Jesus does not address the disciples' question directly, but teaches the power of faith. It is not the size of our faith that prepares us, but rather how lively our faith is. A lively seed has the power to grow plants, plants that can burst through soil, slowly penetrate concrete, and even, given time pull apart brick and mortar.

Even the smallest faith can do amazing things. Our faith, even when tiny, is strong enough to rip up a tree and have it be planted in the sea, which is an odd example, when you think about it.. that seems to be pretty unhelpful.

Yet by emphasizing an absurd demonstration of the power of faith in God, Christ suggests that, just maybe, focusing on what we can do with our faith is missing the point. Focusing on whether our faith can perform miracles in the horticulture department and not the God that is the subject of our faith ultimately centers ourselves and not God.

16<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran Theologian, Philipp Melanchthon, argues that this teaching demonstrates three different types of faith. We have the historical faith (ie believing and trusting what the scriptures reveal to us), justifying faith (belief in the promises of God and apprehends the mercy and grace of God in Christ Jesus), and a miraculous faith (the belief is that through God, all things are possible).

The miraculous faith that Christ talks about here reminds us that we believe that God can do anything, not that we have the power to do anything.

Jesus' teaching on faith reminds the disciples that they have already been given faith, when that faith in God must be planted in their hearts, tended to by constant prayer, and fed by God will draw them into the work of God.

So back to the Jesus teaching us to proclaim our worthlessness. In light of Jesus' teaching on faith, perhaps this proclamation of our worthlessness and service to God helps us decouple our works of righteousness from our place in God's kingdom.

We must decenter ourselves and focus on God. We do not work tirelessly for the good of God's kingdom to gain reward or recognition, but because we have faith in God working through us. Earlier in his Gospel, St. Luke, chapter 14, reminds us that the doors to the wedding banquet are opened to all, even the least profitable among us. Yet, this teaching reminds us that we must constantly remember that our faith is centered on God and not the work of our hands.

We recognize that we will always serve *something*, it could be ourselves, it could be our wallets, it could be our own power, but when we become servants of God, we are liberated from attaching our justification to our worth, focusing instead on the one who justifies us, that is Jesus Christ. We might be worthless servants, but we have been made worthy to stand before God, and that *is* good news.

Now a sermon about wrestling with challenging scripture would fall short if I did not address the psalm. Psalm 137, which ends with to harrowing words, “Happy shall he be who takes your little ones, and dashes them against the rock!” Try as I might, I cannot make this verse into good news.

Yet, after we have wrestled with our faith and our service to God, I believe this text might be read as a warning. In times of anger and grief, when our lives become disordered, it can be easy to disorder our faith, shifting away from God’s grace, instead becoming subject to our own fantasy of power. Amid their distress, the psalmist finds himself taking delight in the slaughter of children.

This does not come from servanthood to the liberation of God's goodness, but rather enslavement to the power that we have. We are warned, therefore, to put our faith in God and to serve God and not our own power, that we might be liberated from the worst parts of ourselves.

So, friends, let us take up our work. Let us keep ripping apart scripture and through wrestling with it—the comforting parts and the challenging parts alike—and foster our faith *in* God. Let us do all this, as St. Paul says, “relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.”

Amen.