

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

MULBERRY PIE

Luke 17:5-10

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Joseph Justus van der SABB

5The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6The 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.

7"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'? 8Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 9Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

An Investigation:

Pete: Geez man, we'll need HEAPS of faith to forgive our brothers ... and other annoying people ... over and over!

Nate: Not to mention that thing about not causing little guys to stumble and not hanging millstones around our own necks while trying to swim...

Bart: Yeah! Increase our faith! We'll need more!

Jesus: ... even a tiny piece of faith is enough to do the impossible.

Nate: Oh... so you're saying we already have enough faith to do this? Sweet!

Jesus: Am I?

Pete: So you're saying my faith isn't even as big as a mustard seed yet? I could have sworn it was growing!

Jesus: Am I?

Bart: Oh boy. Now I'm scared to order the tree to fly... what if it doesn't fly!?

Jesus: What if it doesn't?

Pete: What if it does?

Maria: Holy smokes! The suspense is killing me!

Jesus: Things have their place, their worldish order. Slaves are slaves. They do their duty and then, after that, more duties. Masters master. Nor any thanks have for it. Not him and not him either. Don't expect things to be otherwise unless you've the faith to command that tree to, say, toss itself into the ocean. That'd be a real test of whether or not you actually even have faith.

Nate: Dang.

Pete: That's intense, man.

Bart: So... what you're saying is: that mulberry tree will stay where it is, brothers will keep offending each other and repenting and showing up to be forgiven and worthless slaves won't even get thanked for doing overtime, as per normal. So to sum it up, NOTHING IS GOING TO CHANGE! This is really good stuff, Jesus. Tell us more!

Jesus: Ha. Jerusalem, Ho!

DIAGNOSIS: Humble Pie

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Making It*

In the olden days, once upon a time, people measured the Good Life using an olden days yardstick: duty. Echoes of this

deontological perspective remain but are heavily glossed with the gold of our age. "Will this look good on my resume?" "Is this tax deductible?" "What's the cost-benefit analysis looking like?" "Is it in the budget?" "Is it sustainable?" "Will there be matching funds?" "Does this count as overtime?" Duties as a waitress or a clerk, an employee, a parent or pastor, these we know even today. Yet we, of course, are not worthless slaves. And we don't consider those over whom we have power to be worthless slaves. This is 2013, after all. Obedience? Duty? We're up to date. We retired the worthless slaves and got job descriptions and terms of employment.

Some of us are quite satisfied with a system in which waiters and waitresses take their meals at odd hours. We handsomely pay those who stand in for the 'worthless slaves' for their participation in this little charade. We can tell it is a charade because we're not really Masters, and they're not really worthless slaves, or vice versa. Heck, even those who take the role of Masters have taken their turns waiting tables, back in the day. And we tip and we smile and we even thank each other if no one's been surly. So it's all ok.

We still believe in Duty too. Duty to Country. In those rare flashbulb moments we can see them, on bright stages next to flags: handsome, maimed, and broken. "Thank you for your service to your country." "We are worthless slaves. We have done only what we should have done. We have not gone above or beyond the call of duty." Is this the mere pose of self-effacement, or is this top-notch humility? Or is this the definition of Hero? What else is a person who does overtime duty without expectation of thanks or reward? A worthless slave?

But there is another Duty too, and in dim places, you might find the invisible ilk of Mother Theresa. They have no flag to wave and no Hollywood soundtrack to beebop along to. If they are

noticed, they are likely to be harassed and abused, insulted, ridiculed, and mocked for not conforming to the patterns of this world. They are not glamorous enough, well publicized enough. They work in nursing homes and public schools. And in pulpits and in charities. They're not celebrities. They don't Matter. They don't get paid for their overtime. Consider: you'd rather your son or daughter was well paid, well respected, well housed, well married, well sated and with prospects and opportunities yet to come. Versus what? Oh, I don't know... versus working unrecognized somewhere smelly and crowded for the wellbeing of the people God loves, and never moving on... humbly making do on humble pie.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Eating It*

Compare the difference between what we value (self-sacrificial heroism performed by others on behalf of the collective/me) and how we choose to act (what am I getting out of this?). Epic selflessness might bring tears to our eyes and bestir our hearts, but in general, that's hardly enough motivation for us to arise and do likewise. Our hearts are already locked onto what truly matters: me and mine. "Sure, you can walk over me yet again, no skin off my back! Why don't I just go lie down on my cross over here and hold the nails for you, would that help?" And having thought that epic, selfless thought, stand up again, smirk, and walk back to the ranks of Masters and receive congratulatory pats for having held, however briefly and superficially, a truly noble thought. I can be selfless, after all, as long as it is for my greater good, my better bottom line.

Ok, so we're fundamentally selfish, from the genes on up. Does that make us evil? Hardly. We don't value firefighters who run back into a burning building ONLY because they might be going in to help a hypothetical me. No, we truly wish we could do that too. But then, wishing it is as much as we can handle... we

substitute aspirational heroism for real heroism. The real stuff is too physically or mentally strenuous. It would require risking too much. Sort of like acting on my faith. What if I commanded the mulberry tree to levitate and it didn't? How embarrassing! How devastating! I better not even try. What if I did my thankless overtime over and over and no one noticed? What if all my sacrifice didn't even matter?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Choking on It

Somehow, this doesn't taste as good as it should. With not enough faith to walk into this dichotomy... "the suspense is killing me!" What dichotomy? That Duty looms large and that we shirk it. That we are heartless masters of worthless slaves. That we are the worthless slaves of heartless masters. That we choose to rally behind the sound theories that prove that this is how the system has to be, even when it is obviously unjust. That we honor successful heroes and sneer would-be heroes. That we would be heroes too, if only we had a bit more faith. And that then, momentarily heroic, we would finally be worth something, hypothetically. That the New World, the Kingdom, could be ours... if only we had that lonely grain of finally-at-last good enough faith, that genuine Fiducia stuff that tosses mulberry trees into the drink as the least of its stunts. And that, seeing as we don't have even that, Jesus fixes us with that look of his and walks off toward Jerusalem. "I'm ok with being a worthless slave, doing thankless overtime... if that's what you want to call it. How about you? You coming?"

"Well?"

Thus tormented, would we even have the humility to call across the chasm and beg for a single drop of water to cool a parched mouth? Not me. That water? You know what? Forget your drop of water. Dunk me in an ocean. Throw me overboard. And while you're at it, damn Lazarus. Damn Abraham. Damn heroics and thankless

duty. Damn it all.

PROGNOSIS: Impossible Pie

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Receiving It*

There were those days in Jerusalem, the Days of the King: We were there when Jesus went right ahead and laid himself out on the beams and held the spikes for the sledgehammers. He let his life be dwindled by gruesome whips and curses to the size of a mustard seed and then, committing it to God, gave it up entirely. Heroics and thankless duty? Love's outpouring? A ridiculous stunt? Would that we could tell.

"But Lo! Behold! There is no body in this tomb of selfless duty. He is the Forever Living who will not be entombed with the dead. The pie is finished and the oven is empty. It's time for the celebration to begin." And so the Days of the King began... among us. Would that we would tell.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Loving It*

That monumental mulberry tree stands there to this day, a fruitful testament to how good this mulberry pie is. Those who have faith in their Lord don't junk good trees just to show off or to prove to themselves that their faith is now Orange Belt. We live in the Days of the King. Our self-worth is presumed by our Lord's worth. Our *satis* is because he is sufficient. Our faith exists because of our Lord's love for us. We do not self-generate these and buoy ourselves up, bobbing along, constantly seeking to re-inflate lest we sink ... not anymore. We do not despair, that is to say, that we are drawn into the depths, nay, planted there.

In this ocean, down here, in here, we might find an ancient mulberry tree or two. We might find lepers by the dozen. We might find masters who are hungry and we might find worthless slaves who weary of serving thanklessly. We might find

ourselves. We might find our Lord. We might be found by our Lord. "Come and take your place at table, your meal is prepared."

Is this too bleak? Too watery? Too oven-like? Too tomb-like? Can you stand it for the hope of it? The light shines in these darkneses. If this is where the Light has led you, could you wish for anything more? How good Lord to be here. Your Glory fills this place as water and other stuff-like mulberry trees-fills the seas.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Sharing It*

What then of Duty and selfless heroism? Overrated? Selfishness remains a necessary evil? The 'isms of our age will secure our capitulation forever and ever? Are we doomed to thankless overtime with no recourse to happiness or just compensation? Is this the lot of Jesus' faithless disciples through the ages? "This is really good stuff, Jesus, tell us more!"

Ok... selfishness will not be ended in this age. But those who are masters and servants, all who grow in the Lord's house, will not be ruled by it. Though they offend each other, they will repent of it. Endlessly. And they will forgive each other and be forgiven. Endlessly. Slaves and masters will be as little children and receive their worth as a gift from the One who is Worthy. Their time and their overtime will be given freely as gift, an outpouring of abundance and celebration. Those who thank, will thank their Lord. Those who are thanked, will thank their Lord. Humbly making do on humble pie? No, not quite. Rather, taking and eating the sustaining Mulberry Pie, enough to live Life itself.

Bart: So... what you're saying is: that the Mulberry Tree will stay where it is, that brothers will keep offending each other and repenting and showing up to be forgiven, and that worthless

slaves won't even get thanked for doing overtime, as per normal. So to sum it up, now that you're with us, NOTHING IS GOING TO CHANGE! This is really good stuff, Jesus. Tell us more!

"Ha. I'm going to Jerusalem, again. Want to come along?"

"Jerusalem, Ho!"