



Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
October 6, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A welder sees an ad for help at a metals shop and the ad says the pay is \$18-\$25 per hour. He goes in and asks about the job. They give him some metal to weld and tell him to bring it back when he's done. The welder brings back two welds. The first one is beautiful. Pristine beads, straight as an arrow. The shop owner compliments him on such fine work. The second weld is sloppy and unappealing. The shop owner asks "what's up with the difference in welds?" The welder says, "the first one is \$25 an hour and the second one is \$18".

There might be several morals to a joke like this. You get what you pay for, could be one. Or perhaps the moral is that no one goes the extra mile unless they're rewarded for it. Or maybe we could say that going above and beyond requires some motivation – either a passion for the task or some other reward. Jesus seems to be circling all these ideas in today's Gospel text as he calls us to go above and beyond our mere duty to God and our fellow humanity.

Context is always important and it is important here. There is a reason that the lectionary links together the disciples' request that Jesus increase their faith with Jesus' instruction about going above and beyond our mere duty. To summarize their conversation in more modern language, we might restate it as follows:

The disciples say, "Jesus, we see how strong your faith is, please help us to have faith like yours!" And Jesus replies, "Yeah, you guys are pretty weak alright. You could do amazing things with just a small bit of trust in God's love for you and faithfulness to you. But you're always doubting whether God really sees you, really cares about you, and is really at work in your life."

It's in this context – in light of the question, "how can our faith grown stronger?" – that Jesus tells us to push ourselves to do more than just our duty. At our lectionary study group this week, Lynn offered a good analogy. It's like when you were young – your parents probably gave you expectations and chores. Expectations were just how you were expected to live: make your bed, clean your room, hold your knife and fork the

right way. Chores, were extra, however, and that's where your allowance kicked in. If you did the chores that were above and beyond the expectations of day to day life then you would see a reward.

Something similar is at work with our life of faith in the household of God. Our faith, our trust in God's goodness and love for us, our ability to live like Jesus, doesn't really begin to grow strong and vibrant until we step outside the comfortable routine of expectations and begin to follow Jesus into bigger, bolder – and, frankly, scarier – places of discipleship.

What that looks like in a practical sense will be different for each of us. For one person it might mean finally making attendance at worship every Sunday a priority, while for another person, who routinely makes it here every Sunday, it might involve answering a calling into a new ministry or being willing to make a deeper sacrifice of time or money to help with an important need. That's between you and God, but hear what Jesus is telling us: if we want our faith to grow stronger we have to move beyond meeting the routine expectations of the spiritual life and enter into new and different ways of living with God and each other.

The disciples are right to ask Jesus to increase their faith and we would be wise to do the same. Because even though we often talk about faith as though it were a substance – like some kind of holy gasoline with which to fill our tanks – that is not really what faith is. Faith is really the love, trust, and interdependence that defines the connections within God's life. Faith is the loving trust that makes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God. God must share with us that loving trust if we are to have it at all. It is not part of our nature – rather, it is God's gift to us through Jesus Christ. Our prayer should be, “Jesus I have no faith, share your faith and faithfulness with me so that I can truly participate in the life you share with the Father and the Holy Spirit.”

One of the areas of life where the strength of our faith becomes evident is in our generosity: in how much, and when, and where, and how we give to others. I bring this up because we are now entering that season of the year when we begin to make plans for the church's finances in the upcoming year. The Vestry is about to begin working on the 2020 budget and in a couple of weeks we will be asking everyone to make their pledge for next year. We plan to have our ingathering of those pledges on All Saints' Sunday – which is on November 3 this year.

When I look at the finances of our church there are two basic questions that I ask as your priest. Both questions are questions of pastoral care. The first is whether we are being generous as Christ is generous. And my answer to that question is a resounding “yes!” I am very proud of the generosity I see in this Parish. Not

only in what you give of your time, talent, and treasure to the church but also in what I see you give day in and day out in hundreds of places throughout our community.

To comment specifically on your generosity to the church, two numbers stand out in my mind and – I'll be honest – these are numbers I have sometimes bragged about to other priests. The first number is 27. That's the percentage increase in pledges that we had this year over last year. A 27% increase in pledging is phenomenal. The second number is 2,443. That's the dollar amount of the average pledge here at All Saints. Some of us have to give less and some of us are blessed to be able to give more, but that's the average. I'm proud of that number because the national average in the Episcopal Church nation-wide is \$2,800. So, even though we aren't nearly as wealthy as some places – like Manhattan and San Francisco – we are not far from the national average.

The second question I ask is this: is our generosity sufficient to meet the needs of the church? On that question the answer is a little less clear cut. About 1/3 of our annual operating income comes from the earnings off our endowment fund. So, our pledges, our giving to the church, is really only meeting 2/3 of the need we have.

The ideal would be for our pledged giving to fully meet our expenses, that would free the endowment income for outreach, launching new ministries, and making improvements to property. I don't know if increasing our pledged income to fully meet our expenses is what a business analyst would call a realistic goal but I do know that with God all things are possible. All things are possible if we are willing to let Jesus increase our faith by calling us into newer and bolder places of ministry and of giving.

What the Vestry has realized is that if we all could increase our giving by just 10% each year that we would have our expenses fully funded from our giving in about 5-6 years. So that's what I'll be asking you for this year as we prepare to fill out our pledge cards. And I realize that it's the same step of faith I asked you for last year – because that's the step it will take each year to move us where we want to be and, I think, where we need to be.

And let me be clear what I mean by 10%. If you're giving \$100 a week for example, I'm asking you to prayerfully consider giving \$110 per week next year. Just a 10% increase over whatever you're already giving. It's what I plan to do and I hope you will consider doing it as well.

I'll finish by saying this. I know that talking about money sometimes makes us uncomfortable. Not all of us but some of us. If you're like me, you might have been raised to feel there's something unholy about money and that it shouldn't be brought up so directly in the midst of a Holy Eucharist such as this one. My feelings about that have changed a lot over the years as I've delved deeper and deeper into the Gospels. To put it simply, the way Jesus puts it, I've come to realize that where my treasure is there my heart really is also.

Following Jesus, increasing my faith, learning to live in relationship with God – all those things are about where my heart is. So if I'm going to follow Jesus and my faith is going to grow I'm going to have to think and talk about my treasure, about my money, at some point.

I guess what I'm saying is this: I want to be more like Jesus – not just in how I spend my money but in every aspect of my life. How I spend my time, how I treat the people around me, and even what I spend my time thinking about. Because I'm a little bit like the disciples. When I look at Jesus and see his life of faith and generosity I can't help but think, "I want to be more like him."

Amen.