

# Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22), Year C

Luke 17:3-10

## Amazing Faith – In His Service

Do you see yourself as a person of immense patience? Do you keep your cool when someone continues to irritate and niggle you? Or do you find you come to the end of your tether quickly? It's not easy being patient with someone who continually gets on your goat. It is even harder to keep forgiving someone who keeps on annoying you. We like to feel that there's a limit to what can be expected of us. We learn today, however, that Jesus expects us to forgive repeated offenders up to seven times a day. We all know how destructive lack of forgiveness is to those nearest to us. Failure to forgive distances us from each other and builds barriers. We can all too easily feel justified in withholding forgiveness. We like to think our hurt is exceptional, greater than anyone else's.

We're quick to forgive or excuse ourselves. We find it far easier to criticise and condemn, than to pardon and accept someone who has sinned against us. But love keeps no score. Love means always having to say "I'm sorry". Jesus summonses us to be quick to quash our own sins, and slow to point the finger at others. This flies in the face of every natural human tendency. How can forgiveness become the bridge over the troubled waters of daily living? How can we do something so difficult and yet so necessary? Jesus never asks us to forgive others more than He has already forgiven us. To forgive is to offer release from guilt. To forgive makes a new beginning possible. Forgiveness is something we begin with, something we start Monday with in our relationships with each other. As often as someone says "sorry", so often we must forgive, promptly and completely. Prompt pardon prevents feelings of resentment or revenge from growing inside us. It considers a new future infinitely more important than dredging up or dwelling on a damaged past.

There's something miraculous about the way forgiveness reconciles the irreconcilable. No wonder it's been called "the saving grace". Psychologists tell us that the experience of forgiving and accepting forgiveness is the prime characteristic of a happy, creative personality. Without the saving grace of forgiveness, injury gives rise to injury until revenge achieves its destructive aim.

Forgiveness is more, much more than a form of charity. Its benefits extend both ways: it's as beneficial to forgive as it is to be forgiven. It can bring out the best in us and enhance each new day. A wise old lawyer has said: "If I had my way, I'd change the marriage promise to read 'love, honour and forgive'." It would be a healthy reminder of the power that could save many marriages. Forgiveness cannot undo what has already been done; rather, it enables us to accept what has been done and to go on from there. It's through the forgiveness of our faults and failures that we gain the freedom to learn

from experience. Unless you forgive, you cannot love. Discover again and again what a saving grace forgiveness really is.

Forgiveness is a creative and innovative act, which introduces something new and unexpected into a tense situation. We forgive those nearest to us because we have no right to judge them. We have no right to judge them because we cannot see into their hearts. Pardon doesn't excuse sin and evil; it overcomes them. Forgiveness gives the power to love again, with a stronger, deeper love. Forgiveness is a Christlike action that liberates us from anger. Forgiveness refuses to let past injury stand in the way of a fresh start.

Faith can quickly be weakened by a failure to forgive. Jesus' listeners realise this only too well. They feel constant forgiveness would require far more faith than they have. "Increase our faith", they ask Jesus, recognising their need for resources beyond human ability.

Jesus points out that it is not a matter of the size of our faith in God, but rather the right kind of faith. The amount of trust we have is of less significance than its genuineness. Genuine faith can bring about unexpected things. A little bit of faith is a lot when it is centred on God and His promises. Faith is powerful when it is trust in God's ability to bring about what's humanly impossible. When it is regularly fed on God's Word, our faith can achieve amazing things. Jesus reinforces faith's power when He assures us that it's not the power of believing, but rather the power of God in whom we believe that does amazing things.

Faith is a God-given, God-connectedness that can do something more amazing than move mountains. Because "God is our refuge and strength ... we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea (Psalm 46:1)." This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

Growth is the most characteristic feature of a mustard seed. Is your faith growing? Faith grows by getting to know Jesus better. We get to know our Lord better through the study of His Word, through worship and through prayer. It is only a faith that is nurtured and nourished every day that empowers us to keep forgiving those who constantly harass us. Faith can do too many things for us to ever take it for granted. Amazing things happen when God occupies first place, the central place, in our daily lives. Our modern busyness can leave little room for faith to be fed. Our faith is too precious and too great in consequence to not feature on the top of our priorities. Faith's value lies in the wonderful way it links us with almighty God, day by day.

If we want to know if our faith is genuine, we must ask ourselves, "How are we living?" If I was arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me? What difference does faith make in my daily life? Is it a matter of life and death importance to me?

The novelist Charles Kingsley spoke for countless Christians when he said: "I do not want merely to possess a faith; I want a faith that possesses me" - a faith that overwhelms me with the love and mercy of Jesus.

I want a faith that brings benefits to others and not just to myself. Those who think they have a strong faith stand in danger of boasting their mighty achievements. Matthew 7:22-23 says, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!'"

The servant in today's Gospel could not expect any special treatment for simply doing his daily duty. A mid-afternoon meal is being referred to, which was part of a servant's duties. Servants employed back then enjoyed security, and laboured out of a sense of loyalty. It was in their master's interest to care for them, and give them a home and clothing. There was nothing especially merit-worthy in doing what was expected of them. In ordinary life in the time of Jesus, a master never waited on or served his servant. Discharge of one's duty doesn't deserve special rewards.

Christianity isn't some happiness-cult or entertainment enterprise. It involves letting Jesus serve us with His Word and sacraments, so that we're equipped and empowered to serve Him each day, every day of our lives. Jesus did something unique and unheard of. He came not to be served, but to serve us and give His life for us. He was the only Master to wash dirty feet and call His servants His friends. Masters never ate with their servants. Jesus wants to be present at our eating together. He treats each of us, all of us, so much better than we deserve.

Thank God His giving to us isn't measured by our minimal service of Him. Jesus hasn't stopped giving His gifts to us. All our work is but a gathering up of the gifts of God. Our strength, time and talents are gifts of God. Most Christians are too busy thanking God for all His good gifts, to feel they've ever done enough for Him.

Love knows its duty is never done. Love doesn't serve only for the sake of reward. Love's only reward is the privilege to serve without counting the cost. Love always does more than is necessary. Love delights to go the second mile for our Lord. It is when we attempt things beyond our duty, beyond our ability, that we discover our Lord's power and strength, and see how amply He provides for us. He is worthy of our very best, and not just our leftover time and energy.

King David said, "I will not offer God something that costs me nothing." Such a spirit is free of calculation. It refuses to give only as much as it gets out of something. Instead, it delights in being generous and helpful. "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died and was raised for them (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)." Serving our Lord makes life meaningful, because in the Lord, our labour is never in vain, but will initiate results that will last forever.

We serve, looking forward to that amazing day when in heaven, Jesus will come and serve us and meet our every need. "It will be good for those servants whose Master finds them watching when He comes. I tell you the truth, He will dress Himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them (Luke 12:37)." Even in heaven, the Lord of all will be servant of all. When this brief life's service is over, our Saviour's eternal serving of us will commence. What an amazing honour that will be!

Amen.