

Pentecost 20, Year C, Proper 22
All Saints Episcopal Church
Oct. 6, 2013

In the name of God, who creates, redeems and blesses us. Amen.

I really love the Dilbert cartoon strips by Scott Adams. They are some of that very select company of cartoons that have achieved 'classic' status by their satirical and witty take on life. They feature the office workers Dilbert, Alice and Wally and the rather thankless tasks they are frequently occupied with.

One of the strips seems to speak directly to today's gospel reading:

In the first frame, the annual appraisal interview is due and Alice waits for it in the office of the pointy-haired boss. The boss begins, 'Alice, your performance this year is "meets expectations." You get a two percent pay increase.'

Shocked, Alice shouts, 'MEETS EXPECTATIONS?! I worked eighty hours every week!' The boss replies, 'Yeah ... Well, I expected that.'

Defending what she has achieved, Alice stands up and imploringly holds her hand up, saying, 'I earned three patents this year! The company will make millions!!' The boss says, 'Really? Wow. ... I mean ... I expected that too.'

Absolutely beside herself now, Alice continues, 'I donated bone marrow to our biggest customer!!! TWICE!!!' To which the boss replies, 'I noted that under "attendance problem."'

In the final frame, Alice is seen in the lunchroom, head buried in her hands. Dilbert says to Alice, 'I told you the bone marrow thing would haunt you.' And Wally adds, 'I'm starting to think the time I worked through my lunch hour was for nothing.'

Does that sound a little bit like, 'So 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!*" These sayings from Jesus are just too close to the appraisal comments of the pointy-haired boss for comfort. Do our heartfelt and challenging efforts at being good disciples really amount to nothing more than 'Meets expectations?'

At this time of the year our lectionary readings take us through Luke's Gospel in order by verse. Hearing the stories and sayings of Jesus as Luke records in this way is rather different from the isolated excerpts we're used to. Isolated stories, especially the ones we like - the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and the rest - are comforting and reassuring. But when you hear Luke's book as a continuous account, the words change their nature - read it as a whole for yourself and see if you don't get a sense of the change in mood I'm talking about. Taken as a continuous narrative, Luke's Gospel is quite disturbing.

We need to understand the difference between picking and choosing what we read and taking the gospel as a whole. We need to constantly remind ourselves that the man Jesus was an outsider, that he spoke a language quite unintelligible to us, he followed a life-style few of us would survive, and he lived in a culture whose values most of us would reject!

Jesus had just finished telling some stories about people receiving recognition and awards. The parable of the prodigal son tells of a loose-living ingrate who returns home and receives a feast, including the gift of the fatted calf, much to the annoyance of his brother who has labored hard and constantly on the farm. Again, in the parable of the dishonest manager, it is the dishonest manager who is congratulated for being shrewd. And in the story of the rich man and Lazarus we heard last week, it is the poor man who lived in shame and not the rich one who gets the eternal reward of living in the bosom of Father Abraham.

Let's be truthful with ourselves. These are hard stories to hear when we really think about them. We might imagine the disciples saying to themselves, 'If loose-living sons, dishonest managers, and beggars get rewards, imagine what people like us are going to get...'

But then comes the 'Meets Expectations' appraisal. Jesus speaks of slaves not getting any commendations because they have merely been doing what was expected of them.

This Jesus is hard to fathom. His stories and his teachings are so often not what we expect - indeed sometimes not even what we can cope with. Time and time again, Jesus seems to turn everything on its head. The first will be last; the greatest will be the servant of all; the shameful will be honored.

No wonder the disciples' cry was, 'Increase our faith.' Their faith wasn't up to coping with this upside down way of life, they thought. And Jesus' response? 'Faith no bigger than a mustard seed is enough.' That tiny amount of faith is enough to carry you way beyond what you think is the most sensible or do-able thing. Why, with that much faith you could tell a mulberry tree to plant itself in the sea, and it would. And the implication is that it would thrive and bear fruit in such circumstances!

But faith is not really about a kind of commodity that can be measured. It is not for instance, as though three pounds of faith might be adequate to cure a bad cold, but fifty pounds of faith might be necessary to cure a difficult case of arthritis. Or maybe a diagnosis of cancer might require something like five hundred pounds of faith to overcome!

Faith is about the love of God through Jesus Christ. Faith is about being held by Jesus so that you know in your heart that your life and his life and the life of the world are mixed together. Once that happens, you see yourself and your neighbor and your world completely new. Once that happens, you know that the only thing that matters is that love, and that the only reality is grace.

The hard truth is that we cannot earn this gift nor can we achieve it. It's a gift. All we have to do is open up a little and God does the rest. We need faith the size of a mustard seed; that is, we need a small crack in our frozen hearts and God will transform us.

When we think about how we can change the world, we often despair. But let us remember it's not about us, it's about God working through us. What we can do seems to be so little, but there is nothing God cannot do. Our task is to pray for faith and to trust in the giver.

And the truth is, it doesn't take much. A word, a touch, a gesture can cleanse our eyes. It only takes a faith the size of a mustard seed for God to transform us.

Remember in "To Kill a Mockingbird" when the white men come at night and surround the jail where Tom, a black man wrongly accused of a crime, is held? The men are a mob. They do not see Tom; they only see an enemy. They are blinded by rage. Scout, a little girl, watches them. Her father tells her to run away and go

home. But Scout doesn't run, and she doesn't fight. Instead she finds the right word that becomes the mustard seed.

Scout looks at one of the men in the mob and says, "Hey Mister Cunningham, don't you remember me? I go to school with Walter. He's your boy, ain't he? We brought him home for dinner one time. Tell your boy 'hey' for me, will you?" There was a long pause. Then the big man separated himself from the mob, squatted down and took Scout by both her shoulders. "I'll tell him you said 'hey,' little lady." Then the mob dispersed.

The girl whispered the words of grace. She offers the mustard seed of faith that opened the man's eyes and heart and soul. Instead of a black and white world, it's a world of grace.

God whispers those words every day in every place. May we be open enough to receive them.