

Luke 17: 5-10

Unlike the good Samaritan and prodigal son, today's mini-parables are unpleasant and obscure. How to interpret them? There is truth there, if you're willing to dig down, past what Benedict calls "contradiction." Here goes. The themes seem to be faith, duty, reward. Faith and duty are what we need, reward what we want. I also played with a series of words from the sacramentary prayers, showing progression: dread, duty, dare, desire. God gives us, the opening prayer says, more than we dare to ask.

First, faith. Jesus uses the mustard seed idea. Previously he used it comprehensibly. Start little, then the seed grows into a huge plant. Palestinian version of tiny acorn and mighty oak. But today he says, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can tell that mulberry bush to jump in a lake, and it will do so." (It used to be a sycamore in the divinely inspired word of God, which *should not* change; I argue these points with our scripture scholar, Fr Joseph, all the time; he *pretends* he hasn't noticed.) There is an element of magical thinking which I find disagreeable and false to authentic religion. Faith usually *cannot* make things happen differently from what God through the natural order is allowing to happen. That is not what faith is for; it's a distortion of faith. You can't say to the mulberry tree, "Go jump in a lake." Can't happen: why would you want it to? So, to re-frame, the parable could mean that faith causes *you* to ground yourself differently, *within*. Your internal tree can uproot and re-root. You need not stay stuck in false propositions. You can let go of thinking that doesn't work anymore. You might have to be pushed to give up false assumptions about God, for most of us cling to some. If this makes you feel shaky, Jesus says, hang in there. If a mustard seed can blow into different soil and grow, you can too.

Third theme. We like to be rewarded. We need to be affirmed. If we are not, we become bitter. But reward or affirmation must be authentic. True reward is earned, yet when it comes, seems more than we deserve. In order to receive it, we cannot be static and inert. The objective of Jesus' preaching was to shake people up, to blast his hearers into the kingdom of God. We prefer to take things gradually. Jesus often spoke of judgment, not to frighten but to ignite and energize. It may be more helpful to think of evaluation. The sort that happens when we examine our conscience or come to the sacrament of reconciliation. Sometimes evaluation comes confrontationally, when our partner leaves us, when we don't get the promotion we deserve, when we're over our credit limit, when the medical tests bring frightening news. Such "unjust evaluation" seems like the end. But in God's kingdom it can be the beginning. The beginning of a new phase, an opportunity to find life abundant, life eternal.

Second theme: duty, in the unpleasant parable of dutiful servants. The master, who usually represents God, is a nasty tyrant here. His workers sweat all day in the hot fields. When they finished, they rightly expect rest and reward. But *No!* They must go on to the next task: prepare the master's dinner, serve it. They must express thanks for the abominable working conditions, saying, "We are worthless servants; we have only done our duty."

This is the doormat mentality that gives religion a bad name. I don't know what to make of it. I loathe the breast-beating attitude of unworthiness that sometimes passes for holiness. It must be admitted, dear oblates, that St Benedict has some of this. Tools for Good Works 41: "Attribute to God, not to self, anything good in yourself. But admit any evil in you is your own fault, and accuse yourself." Step Six of Humility 6 (deriving from this gospel): "In every task consider yourself a bad, worthless worker, saying with the Prophet, 'I am nothing and know nothing; I am just a beast of burden.'" These statements, elsewhere softened by realistic sensitivity, really try my confidence in Benedict's wisdom.

Let's re-frame. Could the parable be about moving from one life stage to the next? We leave behind our field-work, because we're ready to serve at table (a higher function). When finished there, we say, "With what I've learned, it is time to move on." Fulfilling creative work always leads to something, if it is only dignity and deeper pleasure in the lower task.

Those who see this do not feel worthless. They see how precious and irreplaceable they are. They don't need to brag about it. They don't put down their neighbor. Rather, they are able to affirm that difficult person (the neighbor). In doing so, both souls expand. Faith as desire; duty as opportunity, not dread; daring making discoveries in difficulty.

German photographer Walter Schels took photos of hospice patients terminally ill: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/gallery/2008/mar/31/lifebeforedeath>. They gave him permission to take another photo immediately after death, before the undertaker arrived. In *Life Before Death* he mounted these photos with what they said about their situation. We are dying too, engaged in a final evaluation right now, though we tend to ignore this as morbid. It need not be. Here are four mini-stories of people you might recognize. Maybe in the mirror, maybe as the model of a stage you want to move past. Listen to their secrets.

Klara, age 82. "I just got a new refrigerator: if only I had known! I sometimes hope I'll get better, but other times I know I won't. I think about playing outside as a child, how beautiful it was. If I had to live my life over again, I'd do everything differently. I wouldn't lug along this heavy load." (What the load was or why she regretted her refrigerator purchase, we only guess.)

Gerda, age 68. "My whole life was work, work, work. Now I am being cheated of retirement. Can't death wait?" "But, mama," her daughter says, "we will be reunited in heaven someday." The response: "Don't talk about heaven. Where is God now?" (She wrestles with outworn platitudes that need to be rooted out.)

Henry, age 29. "My friends bring beer and have a little party. They come in pairs, afraid to be alone with me. We watch the football game to avoid conversation. At the door they say, 'Get well soon, buddy.' Don't they get it? I'm going to die and no one will let me talk about it." (If you tell the truth, even uncomfortable truths, you won't stay stuck.)

Finally Rita, age 45. In the first picture her hair is very short. She gives an ironic smile, she holds herself in a bit but her expression is serene. The death picture, three months later, is even more serene, her lips slightly parted, her hair grown out fluffy. Despite the pillow (she is clearly lying flat), there is the strange sensation of Rita floating upwards. This may be why. "When I found out the cancer was terminal I knew exactly what I would do. I phoned my ex-husband. We had not spoken for twenty years. The divorce was very bitter. I withheld our child's custody from him. When I called, he came right over. I don't know why I waited so long to forgive and forget. I'm still fond of him. For weeks before this, I was in such pain I wanted to die. His visit gave me a second chance to be happy and at peace."

Faith, duty, reward, regret. Dread, duty, daring, desire. As the opening prayer says, God gives us more than we dare to ask. He gives us opportunity to find what we desire. This takes work. Before we get to work, it sometimes takes a big shock—like the partner leaving or job loss or terminal diagnosis. The good news is that God comes through the events of our lives, to help us transform them. When the worst happens, you may not be able to command the mulberry tree and make it move. But something may shift. You may, like Rita, nurture what *is* blooming in a way you could not imagine.

Gabriel Myers, OSB