

Sermon ✝ October 2, 2022

Luke 17:5-10

Frank Maxwell

And there he was, the young seminarian, it was graduation day. After eight years of schooling, he was finished. And he had accepted his first call. He was going to a couple of small churches in northern Wisconsin. And, oh he had so much to tell them.

You see he had gone to school for eight years and was full of knowledge. He knew almost everything. He had been schooled in theology, preaching, Greek, Biblical study, counseling, and history. He had so much to tell them.

And they rented a truck, the young seminarian and his wife. They packed it and moved north. And as he drove the truck, the young seminarian, now become a pastor, thought of what he would be doing in the days, and months, and years to come. The future was unknown but he was confident because he had so much to tell them. You see he had gone to school for eight years and was full of knowledge.

And he began his ministry. He preached his sermons, visited the sick and the elderly, and got acquainted with the people and the community. And he knew it would all work out because he had so much to tell them.

Then it happened. He had been there but a few weeks when the phone rang. He recognized the voice of one of the council members. It was John. He was a big, burley man with a strong Finnish accent who had worked on the Lake Superior ore boats all his life. But this day the voice was different somehow . . . it was shaky and quivering.

The voice spoke: *"Pastor ... it's my son, Rodney... he...he was home with his wife and their small children...they were talking and then he was quiet... he took his deer rifle and he went into the woods behind their house...he put the rifle to his head...and he pulled the trigger."*

And then there was silence...a long silence. The voice spoke again, and all he said was, *"Why?"*

And the young seminarian now become a pastor didn't know what to say or what to do. He had so much to tell them but he wasn't prepared for this. He wanted to cry. He too, asked *"Why"* and was angry with God.

And I learned that day about faith—real faith. Not that syrupy, sweet Jesus faith we read about in sugar-coated devotional books—but real faith. Faith stretched beyond its limits as a father mourned the senseless loss of his son and asked, *"Why?"*

Today's gospel is in a section where there is a grouping of parables. Parables that deal with faith. Faith *and* the by-product of faith . . . service.

Faith has extremely mixed meanings and connotation. It is very personal. It is something that every "good" Christian supposed to possess. It is something that is hard to define. It is our own personal belief system.

First point concerning faith: Our believing must not be allowed to stifle our questioning. Too many people have the mistaken notion that true religion is a body of belief that is all neatly wrapped, tightly sealed, tied with a bow, and that no one should even think of tearing it open.

They think that a religious person is one who has made a higher peace with God, one who accepts the Bible and the creeds without question, one who finds complete satisfaction in the church.

As I read the Bible and as I deal with people day-to-day, I find that I can't buy this rosy picture. We have questions that have to be asked and questions with which we must struggle. Questioning is legitimate and must not be condemned. Often in a Bible study, for every answer there are 5 more questions. People don't always trust the religious "*know it all's*".

One rather sharp little boy was in a Sunday School class with a teacher who seemed to think that faith couldn't stand any questioning or probing. After he had been subjected to her for several months he said scornfully: "*Religion is believing what you know isn't true.*"

Second point concerning faith: Our questioning must not be allowed to stifle our believing. Some things are a matter of faith. The concept of a God of creation over-rides some of the smaller questions.

There are questions that we can't escape, but there are also affirmations that we can't evade. And so we find ourselves, not only, at times, doubting our faith, but also doubting our doubts.

Parents who have drifted away from religion still return to the church to have their young children baptized. Young people who profess great skepticism will come to the church to be made husband and wife. People in the midst of a crisis suddenly turn to the comfort and very real help of religion

Is this only custom or social convention? It is because at times of crisis, or at times of great importance, people begin to doubt their doubts and their self sufficiency.

Faith . . . true faith . . . must be daring . . . reaching out against human calculation or expectation. And duty is our response to our faith.

There are many people who go on through life with a grim fixation on doing their duty.

I think of parents who feel they are doing their duty toward their children—and constantly remind them directly or indirectly how self-sacrificing they are—by working at jobs which depress them, jobs which really serve no purpose beyond maintaining some externally induced standard of material consumption.

I think of persons who have devoted a lifetime to the so-called helping professions or to the volunteer work who become bitter and cynical in their later years because their efforts appear to have gone unnoticed, or worse yet, unappreciated.

Or I think of all the people who participate in volunteer organizations who suffer from "good person burn-out". So many persons take on these sacred trusts as if they were sad tasks; a smouldering sense of duty displaces the devotional fire we might hope to find motivating their efforts.

And, for some reason, people feel that if they do their duty to the church . . . they will, in some way, insure themselves a one way ticket to heaven. But that is what we call *work's righteousness*. It is a nearsighted sense of duty. Duty is our response to a loving and forgiving God.

Jesus wasn't talking about duty in the narrow sense . . . but service in the broader sense. If your faith, your constantly changing and yet solid system of beliefs, means anything at all, it means that you respond by simply doing your duty. It is our duty to love and forgive, to seek and to reconcile, and, yes, to question.

Our God is with us always. Our God is the God of people who believe. Our God is the God of people who question.

God is with us always . . . even when we question and scrutinize . . . when we wonder and doubt

God is with us even when we deny God.

For our God is a God of love and asks nothing but obedience.

We are asked to do our duty.

God sent his Son to be dutiful to us. Can we do any less?