

St. Andrew's Church, Kent: October 6, 2019

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In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

After reading today's Gospel, I found myself thinking about the summer of 1984—the summer after I graduated from Trinity College. It was supposed to be an adventurous and lucrative summer. I drove across the country with two friends, and then we flew up to Kenai, Alaska, where our plan was to spend the summer camping while working in a salmon cannery. It was going to be great. My friends had heard from their friends that, because it's Alaska, the wages were high, and, because they needed workers, some canneries even provided meals to their workers. Somehow we had an idea that we'd save up a lot of money, and that we could then use that to live on while finding real jobs, career jobs, in the fall.

Let me emphasize one thing: It did not work out that way. We got up there only to find that the state had shut down salmon fishing because not enough fish were going upstream to spawn. During those first couple of weeks while we were sitting around idly waiting for something to happen, we began to run out of money. At one point, we were down to \$2.54 between us and a bag of groceries—mostly pasta. On Sundays during that time, I went to the local Episcopal parish for church, and I must have looked gaunt, because on two occasions the parishioners insisted that I take the

leftovers from coffee hour back to our camp. Then we started to work off and on—and sometimes really on, perhaps twelve hours in a day—which meant twelve hours standing in ice and fish guts while cleaning salmon coming down a conveyor belt at a faster and faster pace, like something out of *I Love Lucy*, with the canning machines roaring in the background. My clothes stank of fish oil, and nothing ever dried out because, as we were camping, it seemed to be raining most of the time. I was scheduled to return to the Lower 48 sometime in August, and every minute dragged on until that plane ride. My last act, before leaving the bluff where I had been camping with my friends, was to bury the clothes I had worn at work. I remember thinking to myself, as I was getting on that plane, “It’s over. It’s over. It’s over. Thank God—it’s over.”

Nothing worked out on that adventure as planned. I did not build up a nice nest egg to live on while finding my big job that fall. Indeed, with the expenses that went into the trip, I barely broke even. In addition, I certainly was never commended by anyone for extraordinary fish-gutting skills, and it took me several years before I was willing to eat salmon again. And yet — and yet — now, as I look back upon that summer, I think of it as one of the best experiences of my life. I had an adventure, and I endured. No one came to rescue me or my friends, and perhaps I learned over time that the rewards I got from that trip were something far greater than a lump of cash. I saw a small corner of a beautiful part of this country. I met and worked with a curious

range of people, from southern California surfers to Vietnam vets, all of whom had wandered up there for the same reason. I learned something about the church, and the hospitality and welcome it should offer to strangers, and I certainly learned that I'm not suited to factory work. I learned I could endure such hardships, and, perhaps most importantly, I learned all of these lessons not despite the hardship but because of it

That summer came to mind because it helped me to understand what Jesus is saying in this morning's Gospel. It's a difficult Gospel:

In the first part of this passage, after his disciples ask him to increase their faith, he tells them that, if their faith were the size of a mustard seed, they could easily perform wondrous things—his example being the ability to order a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea. With this passage, I'm left wondering what he is saying about faith. After all, I'd like to think I have faith, but I rarely feel as if I can do something wondrous because of my faith.

I'm left wondering if, in responding to his disciples' request to increase their faith, Jesus is commenting—not on their lack of faith—but on the nature of faith. The disciples are asking Jesus to increase their faith because they are beginning to understand that the road ahead of them is a difficult one. Jesus has told them they must give away all that they have to be his disciples; he has said they must take up

their cross daily to follow him; he's even given them a warning that the Son of Man will suffer and be killed. Who wouldn't want more faith in those circumstances—a faith that can work overt and obvious miracles? But, for Jesus, faith is not a magic wand that you wave to make problems go away. Faith is trusting that God is with you even in the midst of the challenges and problems of life—that God is there helping you to endure, to do whatever He calls you to do—that faith is about perseverance in love. In that summer in Alaska, yes, it would have been nice to have some magic wand that would have made the experience easier, but that wasn't possible—and our faith should not be about the possibility that God will make all of our problems go away. We are called to persevere in the midst of the hardships of life—to say, in the end, “Thy will be done,” trusting that in God's love for us, when we do what we can in faith, all will be well.

In the second part of the passage, Jesus tells a parable of sorts about work—and the notion that we should not expect some sort of reward for doing what we're supposed to do. I have to admit there is one side to me that can easily relate to what Jesus is saying. For instance, I can't tell you how many times over the years at school that I've had a student come up to me to brag about some basic accomplishment. “I've cleaned my room!” he might say, and I'll perhaps think to myself something along the lines of, “So what do you want—a trophy? Maybe just a cookie???” He did what he was supposed to do! But I do usually give in and commend the boy, because I

want him to know he's done the right thing. But Jesus says, "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!'" We should not expect a reward, and his language about slaves makes me uncomfortable too.

But in this it seems to me that Jesus is teaching that faith is its *own* reward. I'm thinking back now once again to that summer in Alaska. In no way did my compensation for that summer meet my expectations. As I said, I might have starved without the help of the local parish and their amazing coffee hour, and I did not make much money. Certainly no one offered me a trophy or a cookie or a verbal commendation for doing what I had to do to make it through the summer. Yet in hindsight, as I said, I had an experience which shaped me for the rest of my life and, in some way, is undoubtedly part of the reason I am standing before you today. In hindsight, I know that God was with me in that journey—in the people I met, in the people who were kind to me, in the beautiful places I got to experience. I endured. I grew. I became richer as a person in ways that went far beyond my bank account.

Our life as people of faith—as people who trust in God and Jesus and His way of love—does not promise us a magic wand that will rid us of all hardship, nor does it promise us a reward for persevering through that hardship other than the blessings of faith itself. It calls upon us simply to ask each day, "Good Lord, what would you

have us do today?” It calls upon all us of to end our prayers with the simplest of prayers, “Thy will be done,” trusting that God’s plans for us are more beautiful than we can ask or imagine. It calls upon us to say, when we’ve done our best, and when we’ve persevered through the challenges of life, that “we have done only what we ought to have done.” And it enables us to see, sometimes only in hindsight, how God was with us all along.

All of this seems particularly relevant right now to St. Andrew’s Church. As a parish, we’re walking forward in faith into uncharted territories, trying to do what we’re supposed to do and trying to be who we’re supposed to be, with no certain sense of the future. Through this Gospel, I believe Jesus is simply saying to have faith. To keep doing what we’re supposed to do. To persevere. Yes, this means still coming to church, and singing in the choir, and reading the lessons, and praying for the nation and the world and our loved ones, and asking for forgiveness, and passing the peace, and helping out at parish events. Yes, this means anticipating the future—being ready for next week’s meeting with Canon Tolzman and supporting the vestry in its search for a new rector. Most of all this means leaving this place of blessing each week and going out into to the world to be a blessing to others. If we can all do that, here in the midst of these times that are challenging in so many ways, I think we will find how God was, is, and will be with us always—indeed that nothing can separate us from the love of God for us in Christ Jesus our Lord—and that is its own reward. Amen.