

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle C, 10.6.19

Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4; 2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14;
Luke 17:5-10

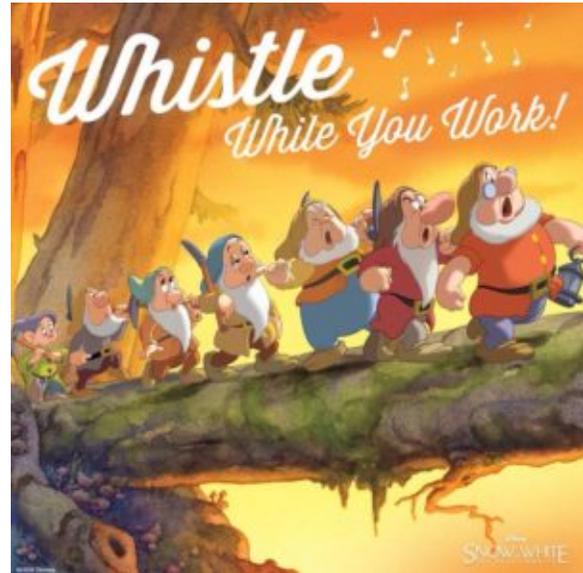
JUST DOIN' OUR DUTY... BUT WITH LOVE

Does this second section of today's gospel sit very well with you? being an "unprofitable servant?" It doesn't with me? Work hard all day, multi-task like the guy in the gospel who was out in the hot sun for hours plowing the field and tending the smelly sheep. You come into the house, maybe expecting to put up your feet for a while, but instead, you have to cook a meal, serve everyone at table and then do the dishes before you get to eat. It's just not fair. Even if we understand that the world of the bible is a whole different culture than our own, that slavery was accepted as a social norm – there are still days when we can feel like indentured servants. So much of life is comprised of just plain tedious and boring tasks.

Last week I came home by car from the San Francisco airport. It took two hours to reach Lafayette – two hours. I thought of so many of you who have commutes to and from work like that five days a week. And you who have to travel far for work, flying around the country or around the world, maneuvering flight schedules, dealing with delays, discomfort and annoying people. There have to be many moments when you just want to throw in the towel. If nothing else, a pat on the back or a "Hey, good job" might sweeten the load, but those can be few in coming. And you have to get up the next day and start all over, like Bill Murray in "Groundhog Day."

Walt Whitman wrote a poem entitled "I Hear America Singing." It begins: *I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear, Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,*

The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam, The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work, The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck...



I'm not so sure this Walt Disney-ish picture of "Whistle while you work..." is the most apt description of the attitude we bring most of the time to the hours that fill our work-a-day world. At the end of his parable Jesus seems to show us no sympathy: *When you have done all you have been commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants; We have done what we were obliged to do.'*" Or as another translation puts it, *"When you've done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say: 'The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.'"* Today's gospel gives us the key to turning the tedium of our work into a source of life and even joy for ourselves and all those we encounter. That clue comes from Jesus as well: *Have faith – even small faith, the size of a mustard seed – and you can move mountains and make a tree jump into the sea.*

I read a newspaper article written by Tracy Grant, a deputy managing editor at the Washington Post. She told her story about becoming her husband's faithful caregiver after he was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Over the course of seven months, her husband Bill, as she described it, "went from beating me silly at tennis to needing my help to go to the bathroom." It was a difficult, stressful and exhausting time, but Tracy writes that those seven months were the time in her life when she felt "most alive."



Her writing moved me to tears and inspired my faith and desire to do the tedious tasks of life with love. She wrote: *I was 42 years old. I had become a respected professional, a responsible and, I hope, loving parent. But I had to discover the reason I was on this earth. During those seven months, I came to understand that whatever else I did in my life, nothing mattered more. I discovered that the petty grievances of an irksome coworker, a child with the sniffles, or a flat tire pales in comparison with the beauty of spontaneous laughter, the night sky, the smells of a bakery. There were moments of joy, laughter, and tenderness everyday - if I was willing to look hard enough. I found I could train myself to set my internal barometer to be more compassionate than callous. How often I need to re-set my internal barometer and remind myself of who I am as a servant of God, and the task I'm called to and each of us is called to by virtue of*

our baptism – to make Christ present in our daily thoughts and words and deeds – whether sublime or mundane.

The woman wrote: *"In the days following Bill's diagnosis and brain surgery, being his caregiver required me to be the best reporter I knew how to be. I found clinical trials and talked to oncologists in Texas, Pennsylvania, and New York. It gave me a sense of purpose, and it gave Bill comfort - and a few chuckles - to overhear me reading the riot act to some insurance rep who'd told me a treatment wouldn't be covered."* And now, years after Bill's death, Tracy looks at those last seven months and can write about them with gratitude. When it became hard for her husband Bill to navigate the stairs, he slept on the family room sofa and she slept on the floor next to him, at the ready if he needed help getting to the bathroom in the middle of the night. She said it was reminiscent of having premie twins and never sleeping more than a few hours at a stretch. With her twin boys, she prayed for the day she would no longer have to tend to them in the wee hours. With her husband Bill, she prayed for another month, another week, another day of being able to have him to care for.



What really surprised me as I read the article were not only her frankness about her love and her emotions – topics we don't often read about in the secular newspaper – but also her open admission

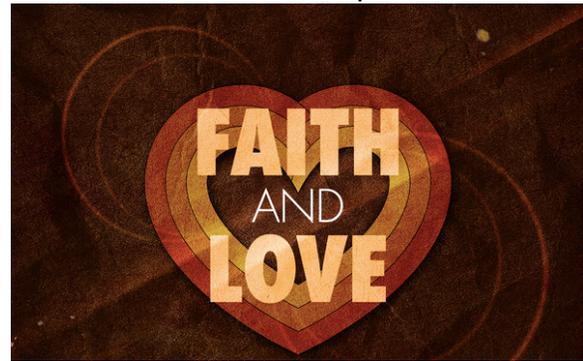
about her Catholic faith and how important it was to her. She said: *When I couldn't sleep during those nights, I took to praying the rosary and then began praying it daily even if I had no difficulty sleeping. There is a reason that prayer beads are common in so many religious traditions dating to well before Christ. For me the repetition of the Hail Mary while caressing pearlescent beads helped slow my breathing, calm my mind. I came to feel naked if I didn't have my rosary beads in a pocket or a purse, within easy reach while scans were performed, IVs dripped, test results were waited for.*



She said that even during the moments when she was most angry with God, she found that she could talk to the Blessed Virgin on the theory that Mary knew a little bit about being challenged by God. Now, saying the rosary is part of her morning ritual, done while walking the dog and bearing witness to the moment when night relinquishes its purchase to a new day. October is the Month of the Rosary – a good opportunity for any of us to learn again the peace and power which come from that traditional prayer of the Church.

So the next time you're feeling under-appreciated or taken for granted, or find your work tedious and your life futile, remember the servant in the gospel and that mustard seed faith that is yours. Because faith is a way of life more than a list of beliefs. And the life of faith is as straightforward as a slave serving his

master dinner. As ordinary as a hired worker fulfilling the terms of his contract. Faith isn't fireworks; it's not meant to dazzle. Faith is simply recognizing our tiny place in relation to God's enormous, creative love, and then filling that place with your whole life. In this sense — and it may sound too simple — faith is simply showing up when you're expected to show up. Faith is doing your duty – but duty motivated and sustained by love.



John Kasper, OSFS