

There are words that make us uncomfortable: Cancer, colonoscopy, tax audit, pop quiz, jihad, recession, Alzheimer's, betrayal – and you can probably think of lots more. Sometimes it's because we know exactly what they mean and sometimes it because we don't really know how they might affect us. Today's short gospel contains two words that we wrestle with: **Faith** and **Duty** – and they both can make us uncomfortable.

I have read that Dorothy Day, social activist now being considered for canonization, was often approached by people who said things to her like, "You are a saint," "You are so special – a true gift of God as a person." She hated that! She was quite gruff with those who suggested these things. She'd say, "No, I'm not! I'm no different from you. If you value what I do, go do it yourself. You could, you know." She detested any language that set her apart from others because she saw it as a cop-out, a way for people to rationalize why they were not more devoted to easing the suffering of the poorest. If her faith were special or different, it let them off the hook.

The disciples were that way – they saw what their faithfulness would require and decided that they didn't have enough faith to consider such choices. "Excuses, excuses," Jesus tells them. We say "I don't have enough faith to be that kind of person, the kind of person who..." And Jesus cuts us off saying, "Sure you do."

If you are thinking of faith as doctrine, stuff you have to know, things that you have to agree to, then what Jesus is saying won't make a lot of sense. And it doesn't help that the English language does use the word "faith" to cover that sort of thing.

To understand today's gospel we have to understand faith as **courage**. That is what faith will look like when you see it. It will look like courage. Faith is **acting** on your trust that God is with you. Most of the time, if you are **doing** anything worthwhile, it takes courage.

Most people think the opposite of faith is doubt. They think, "I have some doubts, therefore I don't have faith." Well faith doesn't remove doubt. Faith is courage to go into an unknown future in spite of the doubts. Faith doesn't remove fear either. Faith is the courage to do the right thing even when your knees are trembling. Faith doesn't remove disappointments, or guarantee victory. **Faith is the courage to keep on going even when you want to give up, but you keep on going.**

That is what faith looks like. Faith is saying to yourself, **"I don't have to have some special qualification to do what I have to do. All I have to do is have the courage to go on and do it."** Have you ever noticed that although the apostles are considered models of faith, the Bible never mentions the dreams of the apostles? It doesn't even mention the doctrines of the apostles. However, it devotes an entire book to the "Acts of the Apostles." They were the ones who had the courage to do what the lord asked. You increase faith by getting out and doing what the lord asks.

Yet we have to admit that lots of times we aren't really courageous people. So, like the disciples, we ask Jesus to increase our faith, to give us the courage and the strength needed to live according to his high ideals. Jesus agrees that their faith must grow and, when he says that real faith could cause a mulberry tree to be transplanted into the

sea, he is using a metaphor to tell them how radically their lives would change if they would only allow him to fill them with his own vision of life. Moving a mulberry tree would be nothing compared to the radical transformation of the landscape of their lives that would come from courageously doing as he has done.

Then follows the story about a servant who should not expect special recognition just because he has done his duty – that other uncomfortable word. Granted, it is a little disconcerting to hear Jesus telling the servants who have done their duty that they are to consider themselves “unprofitable.” Again English doesn’t help us here because we don’t really have one word for what Jesus is saying. The Greek original suggests simply that these servants should not expect anything further, that they should not be looking for special attention or approval.

Again we are really talking about courage. If they had the courage to trust that God was always with them, whatever they were doing, they would be so confident and joyful that they would not need to be looking constantly for approval and reassurance of their worth. Their confidence would come from the love of God that they experience so they no longer need to be stroked or coddled as if job-approval was all that mattered in life.

The word Duty doesn’t have pleasant connotations for some folk. It’s not pleasant because we’ve come to the place in our society when an all too common motto is “What is the least I can do to get by?” It calls up images of stuff we don’t really want to do.

But ask any parent who gets up at 2:00 a.m. and then at 3:00 a.m. and then at 3:30 a.m. to answer the cry of a sick baby why they bother. A parent never asks, "What's the least I can do?"

Ask any man whose income is so limited that after he pays his rent and buys his groceries he has only pennies to spare. But his sweetheart has a birthday the next month and he has his eye on something that means he'll have to go without lunch for three weeks. So he buys it.

Boys' Town is famous for the poster showing a little guy toting a tyke nearly as big as he is, saying, "He's not heavy; he's my brother." Are any of these looking for a medal? No. They're only doing what they know to be the right thing. It's their duty toward those they love.

Jesus is telling us in this reference to duty that often times in life there is a right way, there is a path we ought to follow. There are demands that are placed upon us which allow no letting up in discipline. There is a sense in which we can never say, "Thank God, I'm finished with that. I can now rest. I deserve a break – my duty is done."

Doing the right thing takes courage to act. You have the courage, that faith, or you don't. It won't do to say to Jesus, "Look, I have faith but it is weak." Of course it is weak, and there are times when it is stronger. So it is with love. But what often is passed off as weak faith is in fact no faith, a life lived with verbal assertions of what one believes, but with no noticeable impact on our lives.

Weak faith, like weak love, tries and sometimes fails. But a faith that doesn't try is no faith at all. Love -- and faith is a form of love-- has rhythms and cycles; having ups and down in our relationships is part of being human.

We will have ups and downs in our relationship with god; there will be peaks and valleys in our confidence that he loves us, our confidence that he hears us, our confidence that he has the power to answer us. If we are committed to our love affair with God, then we act on it – probably not perfectly and maybe not all the time and not without some doubts and uncertainties, not without good times and bad. But still we act on it. And that is no more than we expect of anyone who claims to love us. It's what the master expects of his servant. It is our duty.