

## Pocket New Testament

I was going through my office desk the other day and found a pocket New Testament given to me by someone in the Gideons International. The Gideons are a group of Christian businessmen who give away Bibles. They're the ones who make sure every hotel room has a Bible in it. They also go to college campuses and give away pocket New Testaments to everyone who will take one. That's how I got mine, many years ago on the St. Ambrose campus.

In the front of this New Testament they've included lists intended to be helpful: How to Find Help When... (afraid, lonely, tempted, etc.); Teachings About Some of Life's Problems; and Christian Virtues and Character. Each list has Bible verses to answer every problem. It's a time-honored belief in some Christian circles, that whatever question you have, the Bible answers it.

I admit that I don't share that belief. The Bible most certainly tells us who God is, who we are as humans, and how we should relate to God and to one another. It teaches us *wisdom*, how to wrestle with the questions of life. It is not an answer book. The evidence for that is that two people can read the same verses and end up with opposite answers.

Jesus, in particular, can be pretty inscrutable. His responses this morning are excellent examples of how he forced his hearers to think for themselves. The apostles made a direct request of him – “increase our faith” – and Jesus proceeded to tell them to do something impossible. Then he essentially called them worthless slaves. It's a wonder that he had any followers by the time he died. It's even more of a wonder that someone could read the Gospels and say that they answer all of our questions.

Who thinks that they have enough faith? What *is* enough faith? “Increase our faith” could be the cry of every disciple of Jesus. The response he gave is hardly helpful. He said that the tiniest amount of faith, the equivalent of a little mustard seed, would be enough to uproot a tree and make it jump into the sea. The implication is that the apostles' faith is even smaller than that. And maybe that's the point. Maybe what Jesus is getting at is that faith is not something to be quantified. Rather, it's something to act on. One of the best responses I've heard to someone who says they don't have enough faith is, decide what you would do if you did have faith, and then do it. It's remarkable how that will increase one's faith.

What about the worthless slaves part? I think that's more about duty – simply doing what one is supposed to do. Duty is not a common word these days; it was better understood by previous generations. I remember asking my uncle once about his feelings in making a particular decision, and he said to me: “You have to understand that ours is not a psychological generation. We didn't think about what we did; we simply did it.” I believe that's what Jesus is getting at in his parable. The slaves or servants simply did what they were supposed to do. They didn't first go through a long search of their feelings, wants, and needs.

In thinking about this I decided to see what my Gideon New Testament had to say about duty. I was startled when it referred me to a different passage in Luke, in which the scribes tried to trap Jesus by asking him if it were lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. I suspect that says more about the businessman ethic of the Gideons. Don't cheat on your taxes!

So I don't look for direct answers to questions in my Bible. I don't open it up at random, point my finger at a page, and expect to find a solution. Nevertheless, I *do* expect to find wisdom. I know I may be challenged by what I read. Sometimes I'm perplexed, sometimes I'm convicted, and sometimes I'm relieved. In any case I know that I will always encounter the living God there. That's why I kept that little New Testament. It was and still is yet another way for me to encounter the life-giving Word.

[Pentecost 17: Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10.]