

Sermon for Triune Chapel

October 6, 2019

“If you had faith...”

I am always humbled by an invitation to be in this pulpit; yet immensely grateful for another opportunity to explore the Scripture with you—who are my community of Christian accountability. My prayer is that all of us together will be guided by the Holy Spirit to the breadth and depth of this morning’s lesson. Amen

Now I have to tell you that I did not choose the Scripture passage that I am going to share with you shortly. Well, I didn’t, and I did, for, of course, I was the one who finally settled on it. I could have chosen differently, gone to an old favorite, but as I prepared I came to believe that this lesson chose me—lie it or not—and maybe chose us. Here is how it worked:

Whenever I am asked to deliver a sermon, I generally consult the list of yearly readings in the New Common Lectionary to find the prescribed text for that particular Sunday; i.e., the text that was formally designated by the churches many decades ago for Christians around the globe to read and study this particular week.

Preachers are not required to use the lectionary reading for any particular Sunday, but my seminary teachers strongly encouraged it—in order to push us to tackle some portions of Scripture that we might otherwise try to avoid!

The problem is that those of us using the lectionary list to find our text, sometimes draw a passage that is strange, seemingly illogical, definitely aggravating and confounding, and downright confusing. It’s no wonder we would like to skip over it.

There you have it. That was the case for me today! So, have a little patience with me this morning, because I have had to work this text or, really, allow it to work me, pray over it, fight with it, and frankly I

wonder still if I have gotten the fullness of its sacred meaning. There is surely plenty of room for your heart, mind and soul to enter into the interpretation as well! I hope you will!

Please join me as we read it together:

We are reading from Luke 17: 5-10.

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶ The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a^[a] mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

And then Jesus continues:

⁷ “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? ⁸ Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? ⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰ 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!’”

Whew! That is harsh! I have to say that if the lectionary lesson had ended after the mustard seed part, this might have been a different sermon, and might have been more naïve, encouraging and more than a little self-serving. But paired with the slave and master portion, this lesson became for me a sobering scolding.

Imagine, if you will, that we are among the disciples there that day. Walking with Jesus, we have already heard a number of strong teachings about what it really means to be faithful to God. Most of them seem blatantly, even unacceptably, contradictory to the existing rules and norms of our culture. Faith, as Jesus presents it, seems to be overly and perhaps unrealistically demanding—things like forgiving those who offended or hurt you at least seven times a day or giving up all you have or loving your enemies or caring for foreigners.

Taking in these heavy costs of discipleship, we worried disciples murmur, “Lord, increase our faith ...”

They, like we, wonder if they can be obedient to such gestures of unconditional love and mercy in the real world where the ground rules are so different and the consequences so problematic.

Lord, increase our faith...

An innocent and well-meaning plea any of us might make. But Jesus uses the moment to teach us all something about the true meaning of faith. He chooses to be uncomfortably pointed in his remarks. At least that’s what I felt! Jesus does not answer their question. Instead, he highlights the lack of their faith!

IF you had faith, he begins... IF... IF... but clearly he is not ready to concede that the disciples have faith at all. Or more to the point that they do not yet know what it means to have faith--faith that reaches far beyond obedience to the commandments.

Good people, those disciples. Like us, I suspect they felt put down and maybe a little bit ashamed. I know I did.

I talk about faith a lot, but when push comes to shove, do I really get what it means to simply have faith? Period.

Jesus gets even more pointed in his mustard seed imagery.

IF... you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you would experience power beyond your imagination, he offers.

BUT... well, obviously they don’t yet have that kind of faith. Maybe we don’t either.

I don’t think Jesus is advocating for us to seek to co-opt God’s power to control nature or anything else with his exaggerated image of moving a tree into the sea. I do think he is asking us to faithfully and humbly acknowledge where the real power of the universe lies, and know that it is not with us, as much as we might like to live in that illusion. There is room for us to grow in faith and to enjoy God’s more perfect guidance, but we’d better be darned careful that we

know who is who is the ruler in the realm of ultimate power. That kind of radical surrender to God is the essence of faith, and it is a yes or no response, a planting of the inert seed so that it can grow.

So, there is still encouragement in the mustard seed image. Faith can grow, but first it must be cut loose from our own agendas, even our own desire for access the power of God.

To make it, quite frankly, more uncomfortable, Jesus heaps on with the lesson of real faith. He really, really wants us to know what placing our faith in the love and power of God truly means.

So, in the second part of the lesson, Jesus encourages us disciples to consider the “proper” relationship between master and slave, according to the rules of their (and our) world. (I hope you will forgive me as I leave aside for today the idea of people having or being a slave or servant—which was a familiar custom of those times even for small farmers, so that we can closer to Jesus’s message about faith in God.)

First Jesus asks us to consider that we are masters in *our* world—in charge, in control, having power. In our world, the rules dictate that power wins, wealth wins, someone must answer to our needs, mostly under expectation and not gratitude. We would not expect to be someone else’s slaves by the rules of the world; indeed, (and thankfully) we would rebel and pass laws against that.

But in many ways this is how we relate to God. This is how we “use” our faith—to get God to wait on us! Jesus then gets even more direct and turns the image around. Are we expecting God to reward us for our service while we expect others (even God) to serve us without thanks or acknowledgement?

Hear again the final indictment:

⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰ 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!’”

Yeah, I think that Jesus is saying that all too often, we just want God to prepare our meal, so to speak and wait on us as we partake, often with no thanks for God's service! But Jesus declares: we have got it all wrong. Faith in no way makes God our servant. However, we can and often do keep on trying to live in the illusion of power and place, sitting ourselves down right beside God, and ahead of others, at the table of life.

Such is not faith, Jesus says, not even a mustard seed of faith.

Faith as complete surrender is the most radically humble response we can give to the One who made us, who indeed "owns" us.

When we desire to increase something, even our faith, we may be unconsciously desiring to increase our personal power and outcomes. I think Jesus is telling the disciples then and now that there is a first step to the kind of empowerment that God intends for our lives. It is that step of humble surrender, complete trust. The mustard seed here is the emblem of complete surrender to God. The seed of faith knows nothing until it is planted, but then it "knows" for sure what to do! Grow!

There are those among us here who have surrendered all. They tell us that surrender came when all else failed. These are stories of pain and despair, loss and disillusionment. And yet, they also tell how a tiny, humble, pleading voice of full surrender to God grows into something new and becomes for them and for others a powerful and rich witness for the all-encompassing, forgiving, ever-lasting love of God—who waits to be planted in our hearts, who waits to be humbly served, not as a slave master waits but as a parent waits—for us to grow up in faith. Sometimes I think we are simply three-year-olds in the pursuit of true faith—believing in ourselves until we fall down.

When we surrender, let us remember that we are surrender to the power of unconditional Love. The more of that power around, the better off we will all be!

My own surrender seems to come in sporadic moments, but somehow held within some eternal flow of faith. I hope to increase that flow with practice.

I think that I have quoted writer Tosha Silver before, but here is her take on increasing the flow of real faith,. Someone asked her what it means to be “outrageously open” to God. She replied in her book of the same title:

“When the agendas and shopping lists of the ego are released, room is created for a Divine Plan far beyond the manipulations of the mind. To me, this is what creates true happiness and awakening. Then existence becomes a daily surprise as it unfolds, and we can literally be used by Love as a force for good. Life happens through us and for us, rather than BY us. It is actually a very, very powerful way to live. And it is available to anyone...with practice.”

In our midst this morning, I know there are those who could tell us about the miracles of surrender—not so much being able to plant a mulberry bush in the sea, but something that feels just that big—like recovering a life apart from addiction, like being given a second chance, like finding true friends and a community of caring, like rediscovering a talent, like finding a job. Those are the dramatic moments of faith. But the real drama is the moment any one of us gives it all over to the one who made us and breathes in us, the moment of acceptance of our true place and purpose in the kingdom of God’s love. With practice, may it be so!

Amen