

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
October 2, 2022 – The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Luke 17:5-10  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's reading from Luke's Gospel consists of two short lessons. The first is about faith, and it is Jesus' response to the disciples' request: "Increase our faith!". But why are they making this request? Between the lesson we read last week – the parable of the rich man and Lazarus – and this morning's reading are a few important verses that we haven't heard.

Just before the disciples' request for more faith are these words about forgiveness. Jesus said, "If another disciple [or brother] sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (Luke 17:3-5). As we might say today, "Seriously?" Who can be faithful enough to this teaching of Jesus about forgiveness to put it into practice daily?

Jesus then describes the power of faith in this way: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." In Matthew's Gospel we find the more familiar saying of Jesus: "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move" (Matthew 17:20).

There are many interpretations of these words about faith the size of a mustard seed. Several popular interpretations center on the idea that the disciples' faith was small – only the size of a tiny mustard seed. If their faith had been greater, they could have done the seemingly impossible – tell a tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea. According to this interpretation, the lesson to take from Jesus' words is that our faith needs to become greater so that we can follow his teaching. The burden is on us; our faith is too small. I'm sure most of us can relate to this interpretation. How often might we say with the man who begged Jesus to heal his epileptic son, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24)!

But another possible interpretation is that Jesus recognizes that he has just commanded his followers to do what is practically impossible – to forgive others seven times one day and then to do it all over again the next day. Jesus recognizes that to obey this commandment, the disciples would need a huge amount of faith, more faith than it would take to command a mulberry tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea. According to this interpretation, the lesson to take from Jesus' words is that we cannot perfectly follow God's commandments. The "bar" is so high that we cannot, by our own will and effort, succeed. We need God. We need the gift of God's grace.

Do you remember the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, when Jesus tells him to sell everything he owns and give the money to the poor? Jesus says, "Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" He replied, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God" (Luke 18:25-27). We who follow Jesus are in a paradoxical position – we are called to do our best to follow God's commandments at the same time realizing that we cannot succeed by our own efforts. Only God can save us.

The second portion of today's reading from Luke is a lesson about service without desire for reward. We may find the idea of seeing ourselves as "worthless slaves" so repulsive that we dismiss the entire lesson. But it is an important lesson about discipleship.

Like the slave in this brief parable, Jesus' disciples have already worked hard. They have given up a great deal to follow Jesus. They have left their homes and possessions and the people they cared about. They have travelled from place to place, not always well received. They have been tired and hungry, upset and overwhelmed by the demands of discipleship. Why have they worked so hard? I think their motivations must have been complex. Desire for reward was surely in the mix.

We can understand the disciples' desire for reward. If we're honest, don't we also hope to be rewarded for following Jesus? We hope to be blessed by God. We hope to go home to God when our bodies die. We just sang a hymn with these words: "O Jesus, thou hast promised to all who follow thee, that where thou art in glory there shall thy servant be." We are like James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who ask Jesus: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:37). But today's lesson reminds us that serving God and following Jesus aren't about what we get as a reward.

As human beings trying to follow Jesus, we can't get it altogether "right". We can't perfectly follow God's commandments. We can't "earn" grace or salvation by our own efforts. We'll never be in the position of claiming as our due God's thanks or God's rewards. No matter how well we follow God's commandments, we must necessarily say, as God's creatures to our Creator, "we have done only what we ought to have done" (Luke 17:10).

But all this doesn't mean we stop trying to follow Jesus, that anything goes. We keep trying, for love. Just as in human relationships, we don't ever love perfectly, but we keep trying and growing, day after day, because we love. When we love God, when we love Jesus, when we serve God and God's people and God's creatures for love, then we find that we are often blessed with what we haven't earned – the gifts of God's grace and God's help.

When we believe and trust in God, there are sometimes amazing, powerful consequences of that trust in our lives. The impossible becomes possible. Many of us know this from personal experience. We can look back at events in our lives, processes of change in our minds and hearts, directions taken and directions abandoned on our life's journey, people who have helped us, and more, and see that God made possible what was impossible. I invite all of us to consider our experiences in this light. Being reminded of this truth about faith and about God's grace can be enough to strengthen our faith and keep us going through the challenges that face us now.

St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us." May the Lord answer our prayer for the grace to follow Jesus, our Master and our friend, today and always. Amen.