

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
October 5, 2025 – The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 17:5-10
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Last Sunday I spoke about how many of us feel discouraged and helpless in the face of the heartbreaking events happening in our world. Perhaps we feel even more discouraged at the realization of how many people are actively making endless trouble and bringing tragedy to countless lives. It may help to recall words of scripture that tell us we are not alone in this.

In today's Old Testament reading we heard the prophet Habakkuk question the Lord just as we might today. 'How long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?' "Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?" The world is not as it should be! "Justice never prevails," and (in another translation) "the villain hedges in the just man." The prophet wants an answer! The Lord's answer is an assurance that at "the end" the Lord's vision will become reality. Meanwhile, the righteous should wait with patience, trusting in the Lord. Psalm 37 takes up the theme: "Do not fret yourselves because of evildoers; put your trust in the Lord and do good; commit your way to the Lord and put your trust in him; wait patiently." While we live in a very imperfect world, we are called to trust – to have faith – in God.

The first portion of this morning's reading from Luke's Gospel is about faith, and it is Jesus' response to the disciples' request: "Increase our faith!". But why are they making this request? Between last week's reading – 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). Who can be faithful enough to this teaching of Jesus about forgiveness to put it into practice every day?

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). The faith that moves mountains.

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, or forgive a brother seven times a day, day after day. 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 someone 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. It is not humanly possible. 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 and help.

We who follow Jesus are in a paradoxical position – we are called to do our best to follow God's commandments while at the same time realizing that we cannot succeed by our own efforts. Only God can save us. There is moral tension in our paradoxical position.

The second portion of today's Gospel reading 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 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 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 getting 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, ways we have been healed 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.

We may also look at the lives of others in the same way. We see how God has done wondrous things for people we know and people we know about. We see how good-hearted people who put their trust in God accomplish so much good in the world. Yes, we must wait with as much patience as we can for the coming of God's kingdom, of God's vision of "the end," but as we wait, let's be encouraged by the goodness in and around us and especially by the eternal goodness of the Lord, in whom we trust. Amen.