

October 2, 2016

20C Pentecost

Rev Ken Wratten, St Stephen's in-the-Field

Lamentations 1:1-6

Deep sadness of Israel defeated and in exile, 586 BC

2 Timothy 1:1-14

God gave a spirit of power, love, self-discipline

Luke 17:5-10

Lord, increase our faith!

Our last month of journey through the Gospel of Luke has shown us a series of parables from Jesus that followed his admonition that we be aware of the cost of being his disciples. It is counter-cultural, and it is hard work. But the benefits are out of this world.

We heard the parable of the lost sheep, pointing out the need for us to recognize when distractions are pulling our attention away from our spiritual life and health. The parable of the lost coin was about us taking inventory whether the events of life have upset our personal schedules, and pulled us away from God over a period of time. The parable of the shrewd manager taught us to be thoughtful and decisive like that manager was, but as Christians, the objective is to direct our life toward the growth of God's reign in ourselves and in the people around us. Finally last week, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus warned how serious an issue it is for us to manage the gifts that God provides each of us with – to manage them in such a way that OUR blessings bless OTHERS.

After the disciples heard all of these rich lessons on being good followers, and to also be good teachers and models for others, he told them in the verses immediately before today's Gospel reading, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

After this long series of stories, each challenging them (and us) to live to some very high standards, and then for them (and us) to be given this command for unlimited forgiveness, they said to Jesus, "Increase our faith!"

The whole list might have been too much for them to feel any hope to accomplish, or maybe it was the one challenge that they were given, to forgive without limits, just before making this plea for more faith.

But Jesus' response should have brought them relief, and it should bring us relief, too. The strength to forgive someone does not have to all come from our own strength. We only need mustard seed sized faith – enough to say, 'God, help me with this one. 'God, I need to let my resentment go'. Or 'God, I need to let my anger go.'

Yesterday I was at a Festival at the Villages, where every Club and group was on display. I had booth duty for the Amateur Radio Club. The table next to ours had one person sitting at it, promoting the club he belongs to. On the table was a display board with symbols of many beliefs; Jewish, Muslim, Suffi, Ying-Yang, something that he said was Christian, but I didn't see anything in the symbol that I recognized, and a few others. He asked me to come join this Club, where people from lots of religious traditions can meet to build up their ability to center within themselves on feelings of love, peace, joy, serenity, forgiveness, and about six other nice feelings. He said that the power for those things lies within us.

I said, 'Well, you said that this was a group for all faith traditions, but what you describe sounds like Buddhism to me. So you don't look to any greater power for all of these feelings, you only look within yourself' He said 'Yes, it's all there.'

I told him that I would not join his group. I believe and rely on God to help me with all of those things, because I know I can't do them on my own. 'Thanks anyways.' It was one of those rare times in life that I felt good that I had the right words to say. I didn't regret 'not saying' something... (Yay God.)

And on the topic of forgiveness, we need to remember that forgiveness is NOT the same thing as reconciliation. Forgiveness is how you respond to what has happened to you in the past. It is totally independent of the person who has hurt you. In fact, there is no need for them to know you have forgiven them.

Reconciliation is an agreement made between two or more people about how they will live and work together in the future. Without forgiveness there cannot be real reconciliation. Even when there is forgiveness, there are some people you probably don't want to be reconciled with. I can forgive the bullies or the violent people of this world, but I will never be reconciled to them or their mission.

Faith is not something we muster up from inside us. It is the gift of God, brought to us by the Holy Spirit. May the breath of the Holy Spirit fill you with even a mustard seed portion of faith, that grows to make your acts of discipleship extra ordinary. Amen.

NOTES:

With a Mustard Seed of Faith You Can Move Mountains of Resentment!

In this week's Gospel the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith. In Luke's Gospel this request comes directly after Jesus has told the disciples that they need to forgive, and forgive, and forgive someone who repeatedly offends (Luke 17:4).

Whether Luke intended any connection between the saying about staying in a state of forgiveness and the disciples request for an increase in faith is unclear to me. Luke's Gospel often seems like he had lots of sayings of Jesus and parables that he couldn't leave out and so he puts them in somewhere, so there may not have been a connection between these two verses.

However, in my current mission of teaching the world to forgive, I can see a significant connection. For many people the idea of forgiving requires an enormous amount of faith when they are living on the dark side of a mountain of resentment.

Also interesting is the disciples request, "increase our faith!" But the object of that faith is not stated. Possibly they are asking for an increase in faith in God. But maybe they are not asking for extra faith in an external God but an increase in their own ability and belief that they would be able to forgive repeatedly.

Jesus tells the disciples if they had faith the size of a mustard seed they could tell mulberry trees to take a hike, and in Matthew's Gospel you could move mountains.

Over the years the one area where my faith has grown astronomically is in the area of helping people learn how to rapidly achieve and sustain a state of forgiveness. Usually it only takes one session, and in many cases it can be done without my ever knowing the story of what somebody did. I have the faith that I can move mountains of resentment, in large part because I have, and nothing builds faith like success.

It is not uncommon after a forgiveness retreat for people to say that they have set themselves free of years, often decades, of resentment, and that they now feel lighter, can breathe now and various aches and pains in shoulders and limbs have gone. One of the coolest stories was of a UCC minister who had come to a training and gone back to his congregation and helped a person free themselves from 65 years of resentment.

I will readily admit that there are lots of other things in myself or the lives of the people whom I encounter where I have very little faith in my ability to even move a mole hill of misery. But not so with resentment.

I often hear people say that they can't forgive and my response is simple: "You are right you can't (they really are right because if they had been able to forgive they would have) and then to continue, "would you like me to teach you how."

I have found that is useless to argue with the assertion they can't forgive, or tell people that they should forgive. In fact telling someone that they should forgive when they have told you they can't is just giving them one more person to resent. What we need to do is teach and empower people how to forgive.

One of the biggest things we need to teach people that **forgiveness is not reconciliation**, they are two very different things. Forgiveness is how you respond to what has happened to you in the past. It is totally independent of the person who has hurt you.

Reconciliation is an agreement between two or more people about how they will live and work together in the future. Without forgiveness there can be no reconciliation. Even with forgiveness there are some people you don't want to be reconciled with. I forgive the Hitlers of this world but I will never be reconciled to them or their mission.

My friend Chris Yaw at [Teaching Forgiveness](#)

ChurchNext has just published 4 videos called **Practical Forgiveness** that I recently recorded. You can find a preview of the first session and the entire program at:

[Practical Forgiveness](#)

If you want to grow your faith in your ability to move mountains of resentment I encourage you to attend one of the upcoming forgiveness training programs.

Mississauga, ON, October 21

Winston Salem NC, November 11

Reflection and Response

Everywhere we turn, we see the need for reform. Sometimes our society seems like a house we can't get clean. We get one room in order, but then another confronts us with disarray. If we improve the environment, we still have problems with education. If we manage political reform, we are still troubled by the unjust allocation of resources or the abuse of children.

Our frustration with the public scene can be mirrored in our own lives. There we find the same ups and downs: a career achievement offset by a damaged relationship; progress toward a personal goal-the setback of an illness. How does faith view this roller coaster?

In today's gospel, Luke consoles us with the good news that even minimal faith will suffice in the face of both worldly concerns and our own particular challenges. To the apostles who picture grandiose schemes, Jesus offers the image of a tiny seed. Perhaps we won't reform the world in our lifetime, he seems to say. What matters more is the simple service, the generous response to the demands of our particular situation. Jesus uses the ordinary example of providing food and drink, a service many people perform so often we don't even think about it. Faith transforms duty so that even our unconscious efforts nurture many.

Peace activist John Dear writes: "Without our faith, nothing happens. The mountainous violence of the world doesn't budge. But with our faith-behold! All things become possible. Non-violence. Disarmament. Justice." The scriptures offer us confidence, vision, reassurance. How do they clarify our own vision?

Luke 17:7ff (NLT) “When a servant comes in from plowing or taking care of sheep, he doesn’t just sit down and eat. He must first prepare his master’s meal and serve him his supper before eating his own. And the servant is not even thanked, because he is merely doing what he is supposed to do. In the same way, when you obey me you should say, ‘We are not worthy of praise. We are servants who have simply done our duty.’”

For the last few readings from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus has been teaching about the responsibilities, duties, sacrifice, and suffering of those who decide to be his disciples.

Love Jesus more than your father or mother, wife or children, brother or sister.

Seek the lost sheep; the non-believer or the lost believer, and help them come home.

Seek the lost coin; when you lose your way, drop everything to get back on course.

Welcome the lost (prodigal) son; NEVER give up, NEVER fail to forgive.

Learn from the shrewd manager: Pay attention to little things that can turn you away from God. Use the blessings God has given you in ways that help others, so that they will see God through you.

Jesus’ followers appeared to be overwhelmed by all this, and responded, ‘Lord, increase our faith!’ Jesus responds with two messages in this short passage for today.

1) Faith even the size of a mustard seed can accomplish miracles.

Like a tiny seed, a small amount of genuine faith in God will take root and grow. Seedling faith will produce major results because it releases God’s power into the world.

2) Unlike the slave (servant in NIV) serving his master by fulfilling his duties, a disciple needs to move past what is commanded; beyond the minimum: to a proactive lifestyle of loving service.

Jesus answers that we must NOT UNDERESTIMATE our own faith; He says to claim what faith we have, and USE it. ANY amount of faith brings God's power into the world, to meet the needs of the world. It is not something we 'get more of' by working harder, or for that matter, by DOING anything.

Paul guides Timothy to put complete trust in the Lord. How might that look for you and me; to have complete trust, even with faith as small as a mustard seed, but with faith of such a quality that it can move a mulberry tree, or as Matthew wrote, to move mountains.

Mustard seed faith: faith enough to pray – grace, parking spot, daily, breath prayer “without ceasing”. If you have the faith to pray; pray.

Faith to commit to membership in a faith community (to trust) - not just attendance. If you have faith to commit; commit.

Faith to give money for the activities and ministry of a church – then proportional giving. If you have faith to give; give.

Faith to take your valuable vacation time for a treat, or a trip to a holy place.

If you have faith to challenge your spiritual growth, do it.

Faith to join a ministry, and then to lead a ministry. If you have the faith, join a ministry.

Faith to give your life to God; and again daily. If you have the faith, dedicate your life to God.

The kingdom of God is at work in you: God's reign is alive in you.

Ephesians 2:8, *Faith is the gift of God*. Any trace of faith in you testifies to the truth that God lives within you. You bear within you the power, wonder, beauty and joy of God.

Let me share this quote about faith (Steve Pankey): “In the real world, more faith is not required because faith isn't magic pixie dust or the strength to persevere or the power to believe in something that is patently false or actually impossible. What Indiana Jones does in stepping out on the invisible bridge is not faith, it is stupidity. Faith is about a relationship.

And as a relationship, faith is based on trust, and as much as we humans like to think trust is something you can have more or less of, when it comes down to it, trust and faith are things that you either have or you don't. Faith isn't believing in Jesus, but rather believing Jesus, trusting Jesus, giving your heart to Jesus, having a relationship with Jesus. There is no more or less, there is only being in or out of relationship.”

If you have already invited Jesus to live in you, to be your strength, you do not need MORE faith in order to please God. ANY GENUINE faith empowers God to work in your life in ways that defy ordinary human experience. Keep alert for the extra-ordinary events that come your way through your gift of faith. Use your faith to build on your relationship with God.

If you have NOT invited Jesus to live in you, invite him today. Then know that your life is empowered by Him.

If you have been close to God in the past, but have been feeling distant from Him, remember the words of Paul to Timothy, “Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.”

Faith is the gift of God, brought to each of us by God the Holy Spirit. May the wind of the Spirit fill you with renewed faith and make your acts of service extra ordinary. Amen.