

October 6, 2019 - Pentecost 17C

Guided by Luke: The Small Things of Faith - Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Luke 17:1-10

We are coming off several weeks of really hard, profound teachings about wealth and how to be a disciple who follows Jesus Christ. I am sure I am not alone here in feeling disturbingly inadequate in the shadow of these teachings. There is rejoicing in the parables we have heard, for sure, but the level at which we seem to be required to participate seems overwhelming, to me at least.

Today's sayings are titled - "*Some Sayings of Jesus*". Imagine that Luke, in the writing and compiling of his Gospel, has notes and papers and scrolls scattered all around his desk. He comes across these sayings that he has written down in various travels, and he wonders where to put them after he has written his second or third draft of the Gospel. "*Where would these go?*", he thinks. And for reasons you and I will never fathom, he groups these sayings here. These sayings are, however, not out of character for the overall story in the Gospel of Luke. It is just that they are not really tied to anything we have heard over the past few weeks.

So let's take a deep breath and release all the pressure from the last few weeks about wealth and cosmic outcomes and all the apparent work required as followers of Christ. And let's take some solace that, at least in today's teachings, we share those feelings of being overwhelmed and troubled with the disciples.

These sayings are designed to hinge around the imperative request from the disciples. "*Increase our faith!*" they cry out to Jesus.

The disciples say this is after Jesus tells them to not make people stumble. How do we tell others about our faith in God and Jesus Christ without making them stumble? Once they have committed themselves to the Way of Jesus, how do we make sure they do not stumble because of something we have done or said in the name of the faith?

Stumbling, of course, is a two-way street. We just saw in Bible Study last week, that Paul sees the Jewish people of his day stumbling because they were hard-hearted in their inability to see the Messiah who had just walked among them in the person of Jesus. Paul quotes Isaiah 28, when he says in Romans 9:

*They have stumbled over the stumbling-stone,<sup>33</sup> as it is written,  
'See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make people stumble, a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'*

Sometimes, those who hear about Jesus have stumbling blocks in place already. They are cynical. They have been harmed in some way. They have been betrayed. They are just head-strong. Sometimes, we create stumbling blocks for people in what we say or do as Christians. We tell people they are going to hell. We present ourselves in hypocritical ways. We dissolve faith in Christ so much that it doesn't really matter what a person believes. It is really hard to tell where the stumbling happens, so Jesus says simply, *"Don't be the one who creates the stumbling block"*. It sounds simple, and it should be, but we all know that following Jesus is a complex thing once our following meets daily life and other people. Suffice it to say, we are now the carriers of the faith, so it is therefore our responsibility to not be the one who makes coming to the faith an insurmountable hurdle for those who do not believe.

Then Jesus shares a saying about forgiveness. Jesus calls those who have wronged a person or the community of faith to repent. And then Jesus calls those who have witnessed the repentance to forgive the person who wronged the person or community.

Repenting of things can be very, very hard, especially if we believe ourselves to be very right about things we have said or done. Often, we prefer our rightness, our personal sense of righteousness, to reconciling with others. Forgiveness of the one who repents can be hard, but perhaps not as hard as repenting of the wrong. The humility required to repent is an enormous act of the will, a monstrous compression of the ego and sense of self.

Forgiveness of another once or twice can be a relief and a release of burdens carried. What makes forgiveness really hard, though, is when the person you have forgiven goes out and does the same thing again and again, even if that person doesn't want to do that thing they did again. This happens with addicts often.

But what does Jesus say about the person who goes out and does the same thing again, and then returns looking for forgiveness, for reconciliation with the community? He says, *"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."*

If you are even remotely like me, this seems profoundly impossible. Immediately, we begin to spin *"but what if..."* justifications for not forgiving. What if they are an abusive person? What if the person is destroying my livelihood? What if they are a criminal? While our individual limits to forgiveness and what constitutes 'true repentance' are different, we all have limits in place. And so, we share the sense of impossibility with the disciples, because it is after this crazy imperative *"you must forgive"* here that the disciples make their plea to Jesus.

*“Increase our faith!”*, they demand. Like us, the quantity of faith required to avoid stumbling blocks for others and to forgive over and over again seems beyond human, beyond the capacity of each one of us. I don’t have enough faith for this. I can’t generate enough faith to power through repenting, forgiving, and not screwing up the faith for everyone else. It is an impossible demand, and I really need to increase my faith to do these things.

Jesus offers two sayings in response to this.

First, he says, and I paraphrase here, *“If you have any faith at all, even the size of a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds (Mk and Mt), you could uproot this mulberry tree and send it into the ocean”*. How are we to understand this?

Faith, according to Jesus, is not a thing of **quantity**. Faith is, in fact, not a thing at all. Faith is an action, a reaction, a verb primarily, which connects the subject, us, to the object, the other and God. Faith is not measured by having a little or a lot of it. Faith, instead, is seen in what it does in the world and with others.

Even that isn’t quite right.

Faith is the act of turning and re-turning to God, over and over again. Maybe it is in the small act of visiting a friend, or having a conversation with a homeless person even if you have no money to give, or buying coffee for the person behind you in line, or just showing up to a gathering you didn’t really want to go to, but in showing up you know the person hosting would feel supported by you. Maybe faith is saying something like, *“I know things are hard now, and I know it can be hard to hear, but know that I love you and God does too.”*

If faith is not a thing to be measured, but instead to be acted upon and with, then the small things of faith have as much value as the large things of faith. You and I may never be around to see the effect of that small act of faith magnified by the power of the Holy Spirit into a deep transformation in the person or the world.

Very simply, these are the small things of faith we do as followers of Jesus. Faith is not a transaction with God, where God merits us good because we do good things and therefore we have proven we have faith in God. Or conversely, we do not earn more faith by doing faithful things. No, faith is a pure gift, not a bargain between us and God. God does not grant us faith as part of a negotiation so that good things happen, whether for us or others. It is a pure gift. There are no scales where we can, or even should, measure faith. Because it is a gift to be given and shared, not a thing to be dealt and bargained in some economy of good and bad, or right and wrong.

Once we realize the nature of that pure gift, we are transformed and changed in little ways and big ways, in seen and unseen ways. The foundation of our lives shift dramatically, even if only we can really see it. That foundation is built on the trust God has shown in us in the gift of faith, by way of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

In Greek, the word for **belief** translates also as *trust*. In our day and age, **trust** may be the better word than *belief*. Belief in American Christianity has come to be part of the transactional relationship we have set up with God. If we check off the right boxes and believe exactly these right things, then we are in right relationship with God and Christ. We are saved.

But that is not what we read in the Gospels. Jesus is not giving tests and doling out faith like rewards in Sunday School for getting the right answer (which, by the way, is always Jesus...). Instead, Jesus heals, does miracles, forgives, and calls without waiting to see if people believe anything about him at all. Instead, Jesus trusts that in his calling, forgiving, miracle-ing, and healing that others will see Jesus' trust in God alone and will trust him as well. And in trusting Jesus, we are compelled by that trust to act in faith with others. Then, faith is a true gift that is not dependent on rewards or recompense in any way.

That understanding of faith as true gift is how we can begin to understand what Jesus is saying in this very strange last saying/parable about the master and the slave. I admit it is really, really hard to read through slave language in Scripture to what is really being said. Our history in America compounds the difficulty with which we read stories like this. Without going deep into that, suffice it to say that Jesus is telling the disciples,

*Listen, like a slave who simply does what s/he has been asked to do - set the table and feed the master and then eat when you are done serving - so also you do what one who trusts deeply in God would do. Be the person you are meant to be and remember who you are, who you are bound to - you are bound as a beloved child of God, a child who trusts in God so that others may also trust in the Lord.*

So these are the things that a disciple does, by way of the small things of the true gift of faith:

Don't create roadblocks to others trusting and loving God, in either your language or your actions.

Forgive others regularly and always, because that is what God does for you.

Trust whatever faith you do have, because it is enough. Focus on what is already there, and recognize your faith for the true gift it actually is.

You wouldn't be here with Jesus and the rest of us if you didn't have a little bit of faith, no matter how small. A little is a lot in the scales of the Lord.  
Knowing these things, do the things that a disciple does.  
Trust the true gift of faith in God and Christ, no matter how small it is within you.

Amen.