

Lk 17:5-10 – “Quantum of Faith” – Oct 3/13

Well, here we are facing yet another challenge! Once again we get to try to understand some seemingly really harsh words that we just heard in Luke’s gospel! A command to say, “We are worthless slaves ...!” Did Jesus have a bad day? Did he get up on the wrong side of the mat? Were his feet giving him trouble? The words that we heard were indeed pretty harsh – but you should have heard what he said just before this – the part about being thrown into the sea with millstones tied around the neck. As Dory in the movie Finding Nemo says, “Somebody’s a Grumpy Gus!”

Actually, today’s text from Luke’s gospel is a superb example of why we should never take or use biblical texts in isolation, but instead take them always in context – in relation to other texts, especially what immediately precedes and follows. If we don’t do that, take into consideration what else is being said, and just grab one or two verses to make a point, we run the risk not only of abusing the meaning of the text but of abusing other people, even of abusing Christ himself. Sadly there are plenty of Christians, even churches and whole denominations, who do exactly that, who take a single verse, sometimes two, and beat other people into submission with them. These verses from Luke’s gospel have often been abused that way. “You don’t even have the faith the size of a mustard seed, you cretin – now flail yourself and repeat after me: I am not worthy!” Now that’s a very explicit example – often the abuse is a whole lot more subtle: “if only you had enough faith, you wouldn’t be having this trouble”.

But, let’s put this all in context, and see what it says. And in case you’re a bit nervous about treating scripture this way, realize that doing so is perfectly legitimate – we are not putting it into a new or artificial context or setting, we are simply looking at the context into which Luke put it, hearing and learning from what Luke had to say about what Jesus had to say. When we do that, and we look at what immediately precedes our reading for today, we do begin to hear a message that sounds less like Jesus having a bad day and more like the consistent message that we hear from Jesus all through scripture, a message of grace, forgiveness and acceptance.

Begin by realizing that this section begins with Jesus talking to his disciples – not to the crowds, not to those who had just heard him for the first time today, but giving instructions to those who had already long ago responded to his call for them to follow, and who had indeed followed him throughout the land as he taught, and healed, and proclaimed the nearness of God’s kingdom. Jesus was speaking to those who now knew him very well. He was speaking in those informal, even abrupt, ways that we use to talk to very good friends, close friends with whom we do not have to be so careful about what we say and how we say it. In this snippet from Luke’s gospel we are privileged to listen in on that conversation, we are honoured to be allowed to sit on the sidelines and learn from what we hear, but we have to keep in mind that the conversation was between Jesus and his disciples.

So, keeping in mind we are overhearing a conversation in which Jesus was instructing his closest followers, what did he have to say? There are four things that Jesus had to say, although we only read the last two. The four, in order, are (1) a caution against causing new believers to stumble in their faith; (2) an order to forgive when someone repents, even seven times a day; (3) the issue about faith the size of a mustard seed; and (4) the bit about the slave making supper. We dropped in for the last two of these instructions, and in doing so it is all too easy to skip over the opening sentence, “The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’” Why would they say that? Here are the closest, longest-serving, most-involved followers of Jesus asking him to increase their faith. Good grief! If they need their faith increased, what hope do we have?!

Note, however, that the apostles are responding to the first two admonitions. Jesus began by saying that “occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!”, and went on to warn them in the strongest of terms just how serious it is for someone, especially those most trusted in the faith, to cause these ‘little ones’ to stumble. Obvious examples of such abuse come readily to mind, cases of sexual abuse by church leaders, both clergy and lay, that have not only driven trusting people out of the faith but ruined their lives. The apostles were wise enough to understand, however, that causes for stumbling come in many forms – even, or perhaps especially, through wrong actions done for what were thought to be the right reasons. Instilling a hatred for the faith through cultural abuse such as the residential school programs comes to mind; so too does driving a person from the faith by overzealous misapplication of questionable doctrine; so also does offending and driving a newcomer away through sheer thoughtlessness. I wonder how many people over the years have stumbled and been pushed from the faith by hearing either openly or through subtle signals, “you’re in my pew!” instead of “Hi! Glad to see you!” Or perhaps a muttered “can’t those children behave?” instead of “is it ever a treat to have such gifted children among us!” As we have observed the decline of the church over the past fifty years I can’t help asking how much of that is due to people stumbling and being pushed out by others.

Now if his opening comments weren’t enough to get the disciples worrying, Jesus follows with an instruction that even if someone sins against you, and repents, you must forgive. Even 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. How can anyone do that? How can Jesus expect anybody, even the most faithful of the faithful, to forgive some obnoxious dork who just keeps on sinning against you, and then has the nerve to repent?! No wonder the disciples exclaimed, “Lord, we can’t do that - increase our faith!”. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t any of us appeal for faith enough to meet such a challenge?

Now this is where we enter the conversation between Jesus and his disciples, with the disciples asking for sufficient faith to handle impossible demands, and with Jesus responding that they already have such sufficient faith. “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, ...” he says to the now very-worried disciples. Now, we need to understand about that word ‘if’. There are two ways to hear an ‘if’ clause: one is to assume that the condition is false, the other is to assume that the condition is true. In English, we tend to hear the ‘if’ as though it means “it’s not really true, but if it is ...”. In Greek, the situation is clearer, as the two cases are more explicit, one expressing a condition that clearly cannot be true (“If I were you, then ...”), and the other confirming a condition expected to be true (“if Christ is our Lord, then ...”). We have the second case here when Jesus says, “if you had faith ...”. Clearly, he is saying, “you already have such faith”, and that faith is effective and powerful beyond what you can imagine – and such faith removes words like “impossible” (a tree being uprooted) and “absurd” (planting a tree in the sea) from your vocabulary. They already have sufficient faith to accomplish what God will ask of them.

In case they get carried away, and begin to misunderstand as so many do today that it is the faith of the believer that causes all the goodness to happen, instead of the grace of God in Christ, the object of our faith, Jesus makes sure the disciples don’t get a swelled head over their new faith. Thus the story of the master and the slave, pointing out in graphical and somewhat uncomfortable pictures how we should remain clear that the power of God at work is neither harnessed to nor controlled by our faith. We have no reason to puff ourselves up because of our faith, and certainly no reason to put demands on God because of our faith. Can you imagine,

Jesus asks the disciples, standing up to God and saying, “you owe me because I’ve been faithful!”?! No, humility is good, but beating yourself up isn’t being called for - simply acknowledging that you’ve done what you’ve been called to do is enough.

And what, precisely, is it that we are called to do in our faith? Well, that comes back to what Jesus had to say about not causing little ones to stumble, doesn’t it? The flip side of that warning would be a call to help others grow in the faith, and the very best way to do that is through loving kindness and support. That is completely consistent with what else Jesus had to say – for example, “Love the Lord your God with all that you are, and love one another as I have loved you”, or “I have come that you might have life, and life abundant”. The issue, the message, is not about millstones or stumbling or lack of faith – the message here is once again a call to respond to the gift of life, the gift of mercy and reconciliation and acceptance through God’s grace in Christ with similar acts of acceptance, reconciliation, mercy – even seven times a day to the same person! We are certainly not called to beat up on others, proclaiming “you are not worthy!” – we are not even called to beat up on ourselves, wailing “I am not worthy!” – we simply are called to use the teensy, weensy yet totally adequate bit of faith that we do have to perform what might sometimes seem impossible – loving God, loving others, loving even ourselves.

I know it’s easy to say, and difficult to do. It’s often hard to have ‘sufficient faith.’ There are many times when the doubts creep in, when we ask in agony “how could anyone, let alone God, love me?” There are times when we too plead for extra doses of faith, including those times when we remember that we are called to love our sister or our brother in faith even if we don’t like them - can’t stand them.

It’s not easy – but it is possible. That’s the overall context of this message. The apostles, who like us had their doubts, had their fears, not only were told by Jesus that they had sufficient faith to accomplish what was asked of them by God but also demonstrated with their lives that their faith was sufficient to the task. They continued to follow Jesus to the last supper and the cross, they continued to follow and to eat and drink with Christ, risen victorious over even the stumbling block of death, and they continued to proclaim the rest of their lives in their faith the grace of God offered in Christ’s name.

Now it’s our turn, to hear that the miniscule grain of faith we have is more than sufficient to accomplish the tasks set before us by God, to proclaim with our words and our actions the loving merciful grace of God offered in Christ’s name, to remove stumbling blocks, to reach out a hand when others stumble, to listen for and to hear and to respond to the faint cries of repentance, and to welcome home the fragile sinners, welcome them home to sit and eat and drink at the table that was indeed prepared by our Lord and master, Christ Jesus.