

## “Increase Our Faith”

Liturgical Date: Proper 22 C

Primary Text: St. Luke 17:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Christ Jesus our Lord (2 Timothy 1:2). The primary text for today, the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, is the Gospel Lesson appointed from St. Luke 17. The title of today’s sermon is “Increase Our Faith”.

In Luke 17 Jesus is continuing to teach His disciples as He makes His final journey to Jerusalem. Upon first reading or hearing this text it appears that Jesus is jumping from one thing to another in a pretty rapid manner: a stern warning for those that would tempt “little ones” to sin, a short Law/Gospel directive on continued forgiveness, a statement on the power of faith, and then a brief parable about a servant doing their duty. But these teachings are more connected than they appear at first glance. In verse 5 we hear the disciples exclaim something that many of us no doubt have prayed at times, *“Increase our faith.”* The fact that Jesus’ teaching here elicits this response and how He responds to it is central to understanding this section of Scripture.

The chapter begins with a stern dose of the Law. Verse 1 says that Jesus is speaking “to his disciples” which included more than only the 12. He states, *“Temptations are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.”* Ouch. I can just see in my mind a big rock being put around someone neck and them cast into certain death in the sea. Remember that the “sea” in the Bible often represents a place of wickedness, of

abandonment. So essentially Jesus is saying here that such people will be cast into eternal damnation in hell, with no hope of return. This makes sense in the context of these verses because in Chapter 16 Jesus had just taught about the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus, a poor beggar is given eternal life and the rich man who loved his possessions and lacked compassion and faith ends up in hell.

Why such a stern warning? Two points with this. First off, the word the ESV translates “temptations” has been translated into English differently in various translations. The KJV says “offenses” and others say “stumbling block.” The Greek word is *skandalon*, from which our English word “scandal” comes from. It can be used to describe a literal “trap” or “snare” such as would be used to trap animals. So Jesus is describing these people worthy of the damning millstone as people whom literally lay a trap, a sneaky and deadly way to entice people to sin. Secondly, the trap is laid for “little ones”. This can be understood as literal children. And we know that Jesus greatly values children and lifts them up as examples for the Kingdom of God. Anyone who would entrap or deceive a child to sin certainly would draw the ire of Jesus. “Little ones” can also refer to new or spiritually immature believers who are just learning and could be more easily led astray by false teaching. So when we understand these things we begin to understand Jesus’ strong words here. Jesus continues in verse 3 to instruct His disciples to “rebuke” brothers who sin.

But as is the case with the Bible, you usually don’t have to read too far to find examples of Law and Gospel. Jesus then launches into a teaching on forgiveness. Verse 3 continues and goes into verse 4, “*and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying ‘I repent’ you must forgive him.*” So when one is

confronted by the Law, and the conscience and Holy Spirit does its work of showing what they did is wrong, forgiveness is available. Not only from God, but we as believers are to forgive. Notice that Jesus said “seven times”. This does not mean that we keep some type of log on people and make tick marks and when they reach 7 we can stop forgiving! St. Augustine wisely said, *“What then is seven times? Always, as often as he shall sin and repent.”* In St. Matthew 18 St. Peter asked Jesus about how many times he should forgive, thinking 7 was a high number and Jesus responded by saying not seven times but 70 times 7. The point here is that God forgives without limits. Seven is the number of perfection and completion and it is no accident Jesus uses it. And as His children, we are to model this. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, *“Forgiveness is not just an occasional act: it is a permanent attitude.”*

Now this all sound wonderful and compassionate. Until you are the one that someone has repeatedly sinned against! Then it gets a little harder, does it not? Do note that this is not some type of “live and let live” forgiveness nor is it a call to naively or passively becoming a human punching bag. This forgiveness is linked to repentance. And if there is genuine repentance, there needs to be genuine forgiveness.

These first few verses obviously impacted the disciples. The admonition against those who would ensnare others in sin is strong. Jesus has established that sin against another person is serious. But then there is the call to forgive in such a liberal way. It challenges them. In Jewish thought of the time forgiveness was to be extended 2, or perhaps 3 times, to the same individual. But seven times? Without limit?

This is where what I told you the central words to the text are spoken in verse 5. Notice that it now says “apostles” mostly likely because this is

now not the broader group of Jesus followers, but specifically the 12 Disciples. *“Increase our faith!”* The Disciples want to take this teaching to heart. Jesus had taught them about forgiveness before. But this was a lot to ask. Could they do it? They recognized they could not, in their own power. Our sinful nature of wanting to “get even”, “settle the score”, and say “I’m done with them” is too strong. It could, and can only, be done in faith.

Increase our Faith!

The good news is that God has given us enough faith. He has given us what we need. We may not see it as much. We may look at others and see them as having “more faith”. But does faith need to be “big” to do great things? Verse 6, *“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”* This is not the only time that Jesus would speak of the mustard seed. The mustard seed is indeed tiny. And the mulberry tree was one of the strongest trees around, with very deep roots. So the idea of something as small and weak as a mustard seed uprooting a mulberry tree and planting it in the ocean sounds impossible. But by faith, the impossible becomes possible. Because the faith that Jesus is speaking of here is not a faith that comes from within us, it is not a creation of ourselves. It is a faith that comes from God Himself. And even a mustard seed-sized dose of faith from the Almighty can move mountains and uproot and plant trees. It can even cause the worst sinner, when he or she repents, to be made new-born again, forgiven and restored. Faith then, is not a power that yields to our own will. It seeks the will of its Giver, and when it does, all things are indeed possible.

To close this section of teaching, Jesus tells a short parable. In this parable the servant is working hard, doing what he is supposed to do. But does the servant deserve any special treatment or accolades for what they

have done, as Jesus asks rhetorically in verse 9? Of course not. Because the servant has only done what he was commanded to do. He is a servant. It is expected for him to do these things.

And as Jesus explained in verse 10, *“We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.”* This parable links back to the Disciples (Apostles) calling out “increase our faith.” Because Jesus responds to this request by affirming that it is faith that they need, not works. Yes, as Christians we do good works. We are supposed to. But these do not earn us anything, they cannot erase our sins. As John Calvin said, *“God naturally owes us nothing, and all the services which we render him are not worth a single straw.”* Or sinful flesh hates to hear that, but it is true. Our good works amount to nothing toward justification. God is the master, we are the servants. We only deserve millstones and rebuke.

But in repentant faith, God does not give us what we deserve. He gives us what faith, the faith He has given us through the Holy Spirit, brings: Forgiveness, life, and salvation. It out of the Divine goodness, mercy, and love of our master that us servants are saved. We serve because we are saved, not in attempting to earn it. Jesus makes that clear in this short parable as the Apology of the Augsburg Confession puts so well in Article VI, *“These words clearly declare that God saves by mercy and because of His promises, not that it is due because of the value of our works.”*

We see that faith is at the center of what Jesus is teaching here. It is what links together these topics, which at first glance don't seem directly related. And I can guarantee you this: Someone is going to sin against you in the future. And I am almost certain that there will be a certain person or people that sin against you multiple times. You might be so mad you begin looking for the nearest millstone! Don't do that-as vengeance belongs to the

Lord. Instead, call out to God as the Disciples did, “Increase our faith! Increase *my* faith!” And then listen to those words that Jesus told them.

He has heard their, our, and your prayer for faith. It may seem small with “room for improvement”, but is it as big as mustard seed? If so, rejoice. Because if you have mustard seed-sized faith you can do what is humanly impossible. You can forgive. You can keep forgiving. And *you* can be forgiven.

“Increase our faith!” And He does. Our mustard seed grows as we read the Bible, pray, witness to others, and fellowship and learn with fellow believers. It grows wherever God’s Word is to water, fertilize, and provide light. He claimed us as His own child in the waters of Holy Baptism. Our faith is nourished when we hear those words from the Lord, “Your sins are forgiven. Come, eat. Take, drink. This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” When we know that it is not what we unworthy servants have done, but by what He has done by the cross and empty tomb.

Increase our faith! Yes, indeed.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.