

Who Among You?
Luke 17:5-10
World Communion Sunday
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Bethel Presbyterian Church
West Union, IA
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Our gospel reading this morning is Luke, chapter 17, verses 5 through 10. Leading up to our reading, Jesus has been teaching to his disciples. First, he cautions them against causing one of the "little ones" to stumble, and the severe consequences of being the cause of their stumbling: "It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." Then Jesus tells them to rebuke brothers and sisters who sin, and to forgive those who ask for forgiveness, every time they ask; even if they sin and ask for forgiveness seven times a day; "you must forgive." All of this is a lot to ask of us disciples, don't you think? The high cost of causing someone to stumble, forgiving every time someone asks. How could this be possible, for the disciples of Jesus? Is this possible for us? Listen to the next part of Luke chapter 17:

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

⁶ The Lord replied, "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.

⁷ "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'?

⁸ Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'?

⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?

¹⁰ So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Luke tells us, in verse 5, that the "apostles" of Jesus said to him, "Increase our faith!"

Two things to take note of in this verse. It is the apostles who say this to Jesus. In Luke, this means it is the twelve that were chosen by Jesus, not the larger group of disciples, the people who learned from and followed Jesus.

Luke chapter 6, verse 13, says: “[Jesus] called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also called apostles.” Later, in chapter 9, these twelve were sent out on a mission. Luke chapter 9, verses 1 & 2 say: “Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” The beginning of chapter 19 was directed at the larger group of disciples, but here in verse 5, it is the twelve who tell Jesus:

“Increase our faith!”

The second thing to note is the punctuation. In the English version the request ends in an exclamation point. In modern texting, this would be in all caps: “INCREASE OUR FAITH!” But not because the apostles are excited, but because this is a command. The disciples are not making a request of Jesus. The Greek verb is Imperative Aorist Active. The apostles are demanding that Jesus increase their faith, and do it now!

Jesus explains that even the smallest amount of faith can do miraculous things, like commanding a tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea. Did you catch that? You could command a tree and it would obey. It would uproot itself, and plant itself in the sea. There is a sense of frustration in Jesus’ reply to the apostles. They had, after all, been with him all along, listened to his teaching, seen the mighty works he had done. The apostles had even gone, “through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.” The apostles had faith; they had all the faith they needed. The problem is that the apostles, as we often do, misunderstand the nature of faith. The crucial thing to remember is that it is not the strength or amount of our faith. It is not a question of how much faith we have, but the one in whom we place our faith. Christian faith is not about the faith of the Christian. Christian faith is about our faith in Christ. When we understand this, when we stop thinking that it is our faith, but know that everything grows out of the faithfulness of God, we begin to understand that nothing is impossible for God. Back at the beginning of Luke’s gospel, when the angel appeared to Mary and told her that she would conceive and bare a son, Mary had doubts, and asked the angel, “How can this be...?” The angel explained that, “nothing will be impossible with God.” The faith the apostles had, the faith that we have, is enough, because it is faith in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, the earthly incarnation of God.

In the second part of our reading, Jesus uses the slave/master relationship to make a point. Jesus asks, “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’?” Jesus begins by asking a question of the apostles that casts them as the role of a master, but, in the end, the roles are

reversed when Jesus says: "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

We need to be careful when looking at this text. We must understand that Jesus is not prescribing a social order of slave and master. This text must not be used to condone oppressive relationships between people. Jesus' point is not that any person should serve another, but that the Christian attitude is one of dutiful service and willing obedience to God, and that God owes nothing to the believer. God owes us nothing for living good Christian lives. The things we do in service to the church and in service to God, are not a means to earn God's favor. Our good works are not a means to earn God's grace. If we think that God owes us anything in return, we are making a big mistake. When we assume that we can deal with God, based on what God owes us, we reject grace as the basis for our relationship with God. When we believe that God owes us something, we are trying to base our relationship with God on our own worth and merit, but God's grace cannot be earned. Nothing we could possibly do would make us worthy of God's grace. Grace, by definition, is the free gift of a loving God, and was never based on the worth of humanity, but the unsurpassed love of God.

On this Word Communion Sunday, as we gather around the table of our Lord; as we engage with one another, with Christians everywhere, and we engage with the One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We partake in the body and blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and we receive the sign and seal of God's faithfulness with us. We partake in the foretaste of the banquet to come, and our response, our duty, in the face of that grace is to serve with faith and energy, and in the end to say: "we have done only what we ought to have done!" Thanks be to God! Amen.

Let us pray:

Faithful God, we struggle with knowing that we have enough faith to fulfill your mission. Grant us the understanding that all the faith we need is that which you give us in your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Servant God, the example of your Son teaches us how to serve your people and your world. Nourished at your table, fed by your feast, guide us to serve your people, to do your will, and to know that we have served you with energy and confidence as your chosen disciples. AMEN.