

Scripture Lesson: Luke 17:1-10

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 75

¹ Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for sin are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come! ² It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ Be on your guard! If a brother or sister sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴ And 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." 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 is 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!' "

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 17:1-10

10/05/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Now Remember..."

Pastor Amy Terhune

Every year, as World Communion Sunday rolls around, a memory sneaks back into mind. It's about my worship professor – one Rev. Dr. Horace T. Allen – who was a wonderful man. He flew all the way out to Michigan from Boston to marry Brad and me once upon a time. But in our worship class in seminary one fall, the topic of World Communion Sunday came up in our discussion. Dr. Allen got a very peeved expression on his face, and he growled at us, "every Sunday is World Communion Sunday!" Which is true... theologically speaking. Every Sunday, Christians all around the world gather, in many ways and tongues and traditions, and they break bread and pour wine and they remember the sacrificial gift of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. That has been the church's tradition since it began in people's gardens and basements 2000 years ago. Many protestant denominations don't observe the sacrament every week, not because there's anything wrong with that, but because, historically, our preachers served a circuit of churches, and the congregation had to wait until the preacher rode through in order to have someone ordained to officiate, and we've just kind of stuck with that schedule. But when the sacrament happens, we share it because Jesus told us to; because he instructed us to remember how his body was broken and his blood spilt to save us.

What never ceases to astonish me is how something so beautiful and so sacred to so many, so defining to our identity as followers of Jesus Christ, has become across the centuries something so divisive and at times, exclusionary. When Christians get together for an ecumenical gathering, one thing we almost never do is serve communion. Because there's just way too much baggage in the way – too many rules and regulations. As if any of us are every worthy on own merit to approach that table. As if any of us truly understand the deep mysteries of God's presence and God's forgiveness. As if God's grace could ever be predicated on whether or not you've had the correct training. I suppose it's really bad form to drag other traditions through the mud, especially on World Communion Sunday, when we're supposed to be emphasizing our unity and shared mission, so I won't do that. But I will say

that I'm a Methodist down to the marrow of my bones, and I'm grateful to serve a church with a truly open communion table. Everyone eats here. Everyone is welcome here. Period. Full stop. Everyone.

My job has never been to serve as a bouncer at the Lord's table. I joke about that sometimes, but it's true. My calling is to share the gospel far and wide. I wholeheartedly believe that God's grace is always around us – it's the spiritual air we breathe. And I never know what God might be doing, but I trust God is working and moving, and I don't want to get in the way. So I serve everyone, welcome everyone, and trust that even the littlest ones among us will leave worship knowing Jesus loves them, not because the bible tells them so – they can't read it yet – but because week by week the church shows them so first.

In our scripture lesson today, the disciples are confronted with uncomfortable truth. Jesus has been teaching them about the call to live uprightly and not lead another on the wrong path – a call that demands they confront sin both in themselves and others, but also that they forgive again and again and again. Confronted with their own sense of inadequacy, they ask Jesus to increase their faith. To which Jesus responds, "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."

This same promise about a mustard seed of faith shows up in the 17th chapter of Matthew's gospel, too, right after Jesus has been transfigured on the mountaintop. While he and Peter, James, and John are up the mountain, the other disciples try to cure a boy of epilepsy, but fail at the task. When Jesus comes down the mountain, he cures the boy. Later, his disciples come to him privately and asked why they could not cast it out. Jesus tells them, "Because of your little faith. If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it would move, and nothing would be impossible for you." Which is lovely and very encouraging for those of us who want to change the world

But Luke records this moment in an entirely different context, and it not so easy to digest. It's more of a struggle in this context because Jesus seems to equate faith with magic tricks. You could move a tree, make a mountain disappear. It sounds like one of those David Copperfield specials from the 80s. Anybody else remember those? Moving mountains – at least metaphorical mountains – is a great image for overcoming challenges, but what good is it to uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the ocean? It'll just kill the tree! How many people have wasted time trying to focus their brainpower on moving mountains or trees, on stopping gravity or death. Elsewhere in the scriptures, the devil comes to Jesus in the desert and tempts him to turn stones into bread or throw himself off the roof of the temple, and Jesus doesn't bite. Because faith isn't a magic trick.

"No the problem isn't their lack of faith, although we can sympathize with their request for more. We always tend to think we need more faith, too. If we just had more faith we would be better Christians. That's what we tell ourselves: if we had more faith, we would give more time, resources, self. We would pray more and worry less. So, we pray as the disciples did, "Increase our faith." What we may not realize is that we are not praying for faith at all. What we are really praying for is for God to make things easier for us. We are asking God to snap His fingers and make it happen for us.

"Years ago, I saw a comedy routine centered around Noah's Ark. In this routine two hippos are being herded through the doors of the Ark and God says, "Wait a minute, Noah, both of those are male. We need a female." Noah is upset, and he complains—it's not so easy to turn a hippopotamus around on a boat, much less take him out, and then go round up another one. God says, "I don't care. Go get another hippo." Finally, in desperation Noah shouts, "Why don't you just change one of them!" My memory is that God replies, "Noah, how long can you tread water?" [2 ¶]s adapted from "Jesus says 'Just Do It'!" by Chane M. Hutton, www.Sermons.com.]

So Jesus knew that the problem was not lack of faith. And neither is ours. So what was the problem? For one thing, they lacked willingness to risk, to fail, to work hard, to do what's necessary. Jesus begins chapter 17 by declaring that stumbling is bound to come, but woe to anyone who causes a little one to stumble. That makes them nervous. Oh no, what if I mess something up? What if I turn someone off on the faith? That's a frightening question. And then Jesus talks about forgiving over and over, and the disciples are intimidated. What if someone hurts me and I can't forgive? These are the questions they're asking themselves. Can I really live this? Lord, give us more faith.

Oh no, says Jesus. You've got faith. That's not what you need. You need to commit to being obedient. You need to go out on a limb despite the danger. You need to be willing to do whatever it takes.

By 1989, baseball player Nolan Ryan reached an incredible 5,000 strikeouts, and all those no hitters. Ryan is a phenomenal baseball player.

In his rookie year, 18 years earlier, Gil Hodges was the manager of the Mets, and was impatient with Ryan. Although Ryan could consistently throw the ball over ninety miles an hour, most of the time it didn't go over the plate. He was walking everybody, hitting a lot of people, too. Hodges told Ryan at the beginning of a particular game that he was to pitch better in that game or he would pull him out and trade him. He would be finished.

Ryan went into that game trying to do his best, determined that he was going to succeed. He played miserably. He walked something like seven or eight batters in four innings. Hodges took him out. Later that season, he was traded to the Angels.

After the game Richard Reeves went down into the locker room to interview the players. He noticed Nolan Ryan was apart from the others, looking into a mirror, obviously having difficulty tying his tie. Reeves got closer to him and noticed that there were tears in his eyes. He was crying. He couldn't see to tie his tie because of the tears.

Reeves remembered that incident on the occasion of celebrating Nolan Ryan as one of the immortals of baseball. He remembered that this legendary man, Nolan Ryan, BEGAN his long string of success thinking he had failed. But he kept on working. He kept on practicing. He kept on doing his job. He didn't let the failure beat him. [story from illustrations on Luke 17:5-10 at www.Sermons.com, original source unknown.] Which is what made him a winner.

Jesus then goes on to talk about a slave and his master, which is another thing that gets us all kinds of uncomfortable. But don't get snagged up in the details. Think about it like this. When you pay your water bill, you don't get a thank you note from the township. Everybody knows that if you want water, you pay the bill. That's how it is.

Let me put it another way. Nobody in love asks themselves what's the least they can do to skate by in the relationship. When you truly love a new boyfriend or girlfriend, a spouse, a child, a parent, a dear friend, you don't ask yourself how much you can avoid! You want to be with them, to do right by them, to give your best to them, to go above and beyond. So you have hard conversations sometimes, and you give up things you want to do in order to be there for the other sometimes. Some things are just part and parcel of living our love. Jesus would say that the same applies to God. We're not slaves. We're beloved children. We don't need more faith. We just need to step out and live the faith we have. And we do it because we love God. God does not owe us anything for living right, for deepening our faith. That's expected, to be sure, but it is also what makes life meaningful, richer, fuller. Love wants to give, to serve, to sacrifice, to be there.

Every couple of months, I go over to Healthsource to preach and lead worship there. And after the main service on Monday morning, we go down to the wing where residents with Alzheimer's or other dementia and memory-related ailments reside. The residents there may not know a name or

recognize a face or even be able to put a coherent sentence together. They sometimes lash out in anger and confusion, not because they're terrible people but because those illnesses seem to steal everything that helps us know who we are. When we go down there, I don't preach a sermon or read a long scripture passage. When we go down there, we sing. When all else fails, they remember the songs, the old hymns, the Lord's prayer. Sometimes they cry as they sing. In that sacred space, it's not the memory of people or accomplishments or triumphs and failures that matters. It's the song that speaks of how much they're loved by God. That's our first and our last awareness.

Which brings us full circle. Today, we remember. We remember Jesus. We remember his death and resurrection. We remember his teaching. We remember one another. We remember our unique calling and our common bond. We remember our past. We remember our future. We remember the gift and the calling of this present moment. We remember how blessed we are. And we remember that in the end, all of us are precious, beloved children of a gracious God. We remember. And we live the faith we have so that others will know the songs, the love, the welcome, the holiness of sitting in God's presence for this moment. Friends, come to the table of grace....