

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
October 6, 2019
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Lamentations 1:1-6
Lamentations 3:19-26 or Psalm 137
1 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

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

It seems a good prayer. And I could imagine a sermon that begins and ends there.

A preacher might remind us – as “Paul” reminds Timothy in our epistle this morning – of the faith passed on to us by those who have gone before. A preacher might hope to rekindle the gifts given us by encouraging us to pray (with the apostles):

"Increase our faith!"

As I said, it seems a good prayer. Except, of course, I don't hear it as a prayer humbly offered; I hear something more petulant and wrong-headed. That's how I make sense of what Jesus' less-than-sympathetic response to the apostles that day.

You see, their plea doesn't come out of a void. There's a backstory here. Immediately before where we begin this morning, Jesus had been talking about their life in community:

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! 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 stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 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.'

Those first four verses of chapter 17 are hard to bear. Fair to guess it all seems too much for them: never be an offense to another; always hold one another accountable to what's expected of them; and, while you're at it, never take offense from anyone. The final words – the expectation that they will forgive again ... and again ... and again (seven times a day every day) – are but the last straw.

And that's really just the tip of the iceberg. Jesus called his disciples to leave behind family and jobs and security. Jesus told would-be followers to give away their possessions. He challenged them to take up their cross – his cross – if they wanted to follow him.

It all seems like too much, so they look to Jesus to give them something to empower them to do the impossible. They all-but-demand that he provide for them what they lack.

But Jesus doesn't offer a sympathetic ear. Instead, he seems to rebuke them:

If you had faith the size of a mustard seed ...

That's how he begins. And maybe it sounds like he's saying they have no faith at all.

But I rather think the opposite. They've shown plenty of faith already – leaving family and jobs and security; giving away all that they owned; following Jesus on the way to the cross. They've shown plenty of faith already. So I rather think Jesus' point is that they already have all the faith they need, that they've already been given enough to do all that's expected of them.

That may not be "happy" news; it may not be the news they want to hear ... oh, but it is still "good" news all the same. You can do more than you think you can. You don't need more faith. You don't need some magical zap. You need only put to use the faith you already have.

Don't be misled by his talk of uprooting trees and planting them in the sea. It's not to be taken literally. Of course it's not. Down through the ages, there have been all sorts of stories told about the saints of God and the miracles they performed – and some of those stories are doozies! – but I don't recall any saint who had the power to make trees fly in the air.

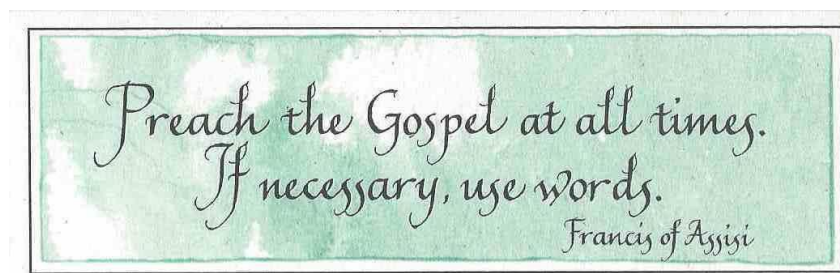
I don't think Jesus was ever looking for his followers to do the impossible. He was simply challenging them to do more than they thought they could ... and live in unconventional ways.

I'm reminded of one of those old stories about St. Francis. He went down into a village one day to preach the Gospel, taking one of the younger monks with him that day. And when they got to the village, they engaged the locals in conversation. They passed the day helping the villagers with their work. They shared stories. They entered into the life of the community.

And then, as the end of the day drew near, Francis got ready to leave. But the brother monk, with great concern, stopped Francis and said, "Didn't we come here to preach the Gospel to these people? When are we going to do that?"

Whereupon, Francis turned to him and said, "If these people have not heard the Gospel today, then reading from the Bible will not make any difference to them!"

The story is almost certainly apocryphal. So, too, the words Francis supposedly added:



It's all almost certainly apocryphal. But that doesn't mean the story – or the moral of that story – is any less true. Preaching the Gospel doesn't require special effects or special gifts.

Jesus himself didn't go about preaching the good news of casting trees into the ocean. No, he preached about what he called the "kingdom of God." He invited us into a new way of living together in this world according to God's dream for how we should live together in this world.

As Michael Curry likes to put it, the invitation is for us to live like Jesus, to love like Jesus, to give and forgive like Jesus.

And Jesus says it's not pie-in-the-sky; it's what we we're here for. It seems too much for us to believe most days – the world seems to work against it – but it's the gospel truth.

And that's why Jesus goes on to talk about a slave who simply goes about the business of doing what's expected. The Lutheran preacher David Lose says this about faith and such service:

Faith is found not in the mighty acts of heaven but in the ordinary and everyday acts of doing what needs to be done, responding to the needs around us, and caring for the people who come our way.

... Martin Luther, writing 500 years ago, once even extolled the virtue of a father changing diapers (emphasizing father because that was so extremely rare, and probably considered unbecoming, at the time): "When a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other menial task for his child, and someone ridicules him as an effeminate fool...God with all [the] angels ... is smiling." ⁱ

Such a life of faith isn't heroic. It isn't magical. It's just doing what needs to be done, big or small, great or mundane, just because it needs doing. And so, when all is said and done, the slave doesn't expect special commendation:

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!"

Now, as soon as I say that, I have to say something about what "worthless" means here. And I'll just tell you, I think it's unfortunate. I don't think the word rings true to what Jesus says anywhere else. There are no worthless children of God.

Some scholars – and several translations – look for better options: some suggest "unworthy servants"; some offer "useless" instead. But neither of those alternatives seem much better to me. (We don't need help running ourselves down.)

Eugene Peterson avoids the description altogether:

When you've done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say, "The work is done. What we were told to do, we did."

I'm glad of what Peterson does. But I think Jesus may be saying something we miss.

To get there, though, I have to dip into some linguistic waters. If amoral means "without morals" and asymmetry means "without symmetry" and abyss means "without a bottom," then what does a-chreioi (ἀχρεῖοι) mean? It has that Greek prefix a (ἀ), so it means "without" something. And maybe it's without value or worth, or maybe something else.

Greek scholar Richard Swanson says education in the classical schools used jokes and stories to get students thinking. They're called chreioi (χρεῖοι). There's this one:

Socrates the philosopher, when a certain student named Apollodorus said to him, "The Athenians have unjustly condemned you to death," responded with a laugh, "But did you want them to do it justly?"

... the joke makes an ethical point, so students will remember it. When the alumni of a school got together over a beer, someone was sure to tell the story of the time old Professor So-and-So told this joke. That was one of the ways you could tell they had been to school, one of the signs that they had an education.

... the word, χρεῖαί, was also used to describe the teaching stories that rabbis used in their schools. It wasn't all Socrates. Moses speaks through χρεῖαί as well. And graduates of those schools would also have told stories on old Rabbi So-and-So when they gathered, and they would have cited those stories when they were considering a point ...ⁱⁱ

The point, I take it, is to suggest that Jesus never denigrates the service or the servant. They may lack formal training – and the stories students learn at school – but that does not diminish their value or their ability to serve. It's just their way of saying:

When you're done doing what you've been told to do, say "We are workers - without stories from the academy; but we have our job to do and we do it well."

The apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. If it's even a prayer at all, I think it's the wrong prayer. Jesus says they do not lack what they need: not formal training; no special talents; and no more faith required. And their prayer, however earnest, misses the point.

I'm always reminded of another prayer when I hear these words. It, too, is pretty simple and pretty short and much more to the point for us this morning:

O God, I don't pray for enough faith to move mountains.
I can get enough dynamite and bulldozers to do that.
What I need and ask for is enough faith to move me.

ⁱ David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-20-c-every-day-acts-of-faith/>.

ⁱⁱ Richard Swanson @ <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/category/provoking-the-gospel/>.