

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 27 (C)
October 2, 2022
Text: Luke 17:5-10

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My dad told me a story once about a friend of his from work. This friend had struggled with poor eyesight for years, and his wife finally persuade him to go see a faith healer. There was a point in the service when people went forward to seek healing, and my dad's friend went forward, and the faith healer told him that, if he had faith, he could be healed. My dad's friend said he felt like he had faith. He really believed this could happen for him, that the faith healer had power to restore his vision. He even thought for a moment, after the faith healer laid hands on him, that he could see clearly again. But when his eyesight turned out to be just as bad as before, he blamed himself. He said that he must not have had enough faith. My dad wasn't buying it. He thought the faith healer was a fraud, but he couldn't get his friend to stop blaming himself.

"If you have faith"—those four words can be so dangerous. Not only are they a refuge for frauds and charlatans, but they also make it easy to imagine that faith is sort of like magic, that having the right amount, or the right kind of faith, allows a believer to tap into some supernatural power and do impossible things. And everything that comes from imagining that faith is like magic is bad. If faith is like magic, then if you have cancer, it's because you don't have enough faith. Or if you have financial troubles, it's because you don't have enough faith. Because if you had faith, then you could tap into God's blessings and your life would be perfect. And that is a lie. Sadly, my dad's friend isn't the only person who has swallowed a load of self-condemnation because they thought they didn't have enough faith. That's why I'd like to spend some time this morning working through these challenging words from Jesus. I believe these challenging words also have a blessing to give. They can give us both encouragement and perspective.

The reason the disciples say, "Increase our faith," is because of what Jesus had just said to them. In the verses right before our reading this morning, Jesus spoke to them about the need to care for each other, to be careful about not doing anything that would damage the faith of another believer, and especially to put a premium on forgiveness. This community we share as God's people is such a treasure. It's so important to nurture and protect these relationships—with honesty and respect and humility. And when misunderstandings or occasions for offense happen, it is essential to pursue forgiveness. So when someone asks for forgiveness, it's important to grant it. Jesus says even if it's seven times a day, it's imperative that we forgive each other. And that's what causes the disciples to clutch their pearls and say, "Lord, increase our faith!" They seem to imagine that forgiving each other and caring for each other will require some sort of super-faith! But that's not really the case at all.

Jesus invites his disciples to imagine having "faith the size of a mustard seed." A mustard seed is so small. This is how Jesus challenges them to understand that the real issue isn't "how much" faith they have. What's important is what a person has faith in, and what they do with it. My

dad's friend had faith. He trusted that the faith healer could restore his eyesight. It just turned out that the faith healer didn't actually have that kind of power. What really matters is what you put your faith in. To put your faith in Jesus means to trust that in his life and teaching he shows us how God is healing the world. The reign of God that brings peace and joy and wholeness and reconciliation comes to us through Jesus and his way of compassion, forgiveness, generosity, humility, and wide-open inclusive community. "How much" faith you have isn't nearly as important as whether you act on it.

That's why, if you have even the tiniest bit of faith in Jesus and his way of love, then, when you act on that faith, you can do incredible, amazing things. So when you act according to Jesus' way of compassion, you can make invisible people be seen. When you live with Jesus' way of forgiveness, you can tear down mountain-sized obstacles of resentment and restore relationships. When you let Jesus' way of generosity shape your choices, you can defeat the powers of selfishness and greed, and experience amazing freedom. When you follow Jesus' way of humility, you can break chains of entitlement and unlock the door to equality and genuine relationships. And when you participate in Jesus' wide-open inclusive community, you are turning away from the prejudice and tribalism and contempt of the past in order to help create a beautiful, new chapter in the story of the human family.

For us as much as for those first disciples, it's just a matter using what we've got. It's sort of like the old Nike slogan: Just do it! If we trust that Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness and inclusive community really is the only way toward wholeness for the human family, and if that's really the sort of world we want to live in, then we need to just do it. It isn't that we need more faith, we just need to use the faith we've got. It still might be challenging, especially when we're bombarded by messages that tell us to trust money and power and status to get the life we want, instead of trusting Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness. Sometimes it might be really hard to choose to be compassionate and forgiving, because some people can be really difficult. And sometimes life is so challenging and painful that it's just hard not to reflexively give in to fear or resentment. But life is also beautiful. And meaningful. And when we act with compassion and forgiveness and generosity and humility, God is at work through us to create more beauty and more meaning.

I find this helps me make sense of the parable at the end of our reading. Jesus says that no slave ever expects a thank you. That's just the way slavery works—which feels really harsh, since it reflects the ancient world's acceptance of slavery as a normal part of life. But then it feels doubly harsh to apply that to our relationship with God. When we've done everything we've been commanded to do, we should say, "We are merely slaves. We've only done what we ought." Is it really the case that there is no recognition or reward for following Jesus' way of love? I think the answer is yes and no.

I believe Jesus is right, that we shouldn't count on being appreciated or rewarded for choosing compassion and forgiveness, certainly not by the world around us. The world operates by a different set of values, and tends (at least in the short term) to reward those who are relentlessly self-promoting and who always look after themselves first. But that doesn't mean

there's no reward. When we choose Jesus' way of forgiveness because we believe his way leads to restored relationships and strong community, aren't restored relationships and strong community part of our reward? And when we choose Jesus' way of compassion and generosity and humility because we believe his way leads to a more humane human family, one that isn't driven by fear and greed and arrogance, our reward is contributing to what is best for us and our children and the earth. And then there's the reward we experience within ourselves—we grow stronger compassion muscles and develop better forgiveness skills. It's sort of like going to the gym, but for our inner life. Even though there will probably always be times when it's difficult to choose compassion and forgiveness, times when we're tempted, maybe, by greed or revenge, God never gives up on us. God is relentlessly drawing us toward a life that is whole.

We may feel we only have a mustard seed of faith—the tiniest amount—but Jesus wants us to know that it is enough for us to participate in the work God is already up to. God is already at work to heal relationships and reconcile those who are estranged. God is already at work to comfort those who grieve and give strength to those who struggle. God is already at work for justice for the poor and to end oppression. And with our mustard seed of faith, with trusting Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, we can be part of the healing and reconciling. We can be part of the comfort and the struggle for justice when we use the faith we have. Thanks be to God. Amen.