

Sunday, October 2, 2022
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 22 (Year C)

Luke 17.5-10

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1332837500588314>

(Sermon begins at about 20:40)

“Getting Out of Our Own Way”

I just love the unique and varied ways God chooses to slap us upside the head right when we need it. Earlier this week, I sat down to look at the Scripture readings for today, to start to get a sense of where I wanted to go with this sermon. Or where God wanted me to go with it. As I was just getting ready to look at the Gospel reading for the first time this week, I was interrupted by a text message. A parishioner sent me some information I had requested. Then came another message from the same parishioner: “Sorry it took so long to respond.” I replied with “No worries. I’ve been a little tied up with other issues, so you have not been in my way. I’ve been in my way.” The response came back: “Better you than me.” At first, I did not think much of the banter via text. As I returned to the Gospel reading, I was hit in rapid succession with the image of the apostles saying to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” and the reminder of my own text: “I’ve been in my way.” And the realization that a flippant text message in the 21st century actually provided some insight into a possible response to the apostles’ desire for increased faith.

The apostles are hungering for increased faith and turn to Jesus wanting a quick-fix. They are obviously not lacking in faith. They already have some faith as demonstrated by their willingness to follow Jesus. But they apparently think their faith is not enough, not sufficient. Why, we are not entirely sure. Although the text immediately prior to today’s reading deals with the subject of forgiving others, which can, admittedly, be challenging. Perhaps they felt they needed more faith to comply with Jesus’ statements about forgiveness. Regardless, they want Jesus to super-size their faith. As if they need someone to give them more faith or possibly that something is preventing their faith from increasing, despite a desire on their part. When the reality is, faith is a very personal thing and the only one who really can increase our faith is us. That’s not to say that God or Jesus or me as your priest may not have something to do with your life of faith, with your sense of increasing faith over time. God and Jesus certainly play a crucial role. And hopefully, I as your priest, or at least the church as a whole, have some part to play, as well. But when it comes to our own faith, we each have a part to play. A crucial part. And when our faith does not increase, more often than not, it is not because God or Jesus or someone else is not doing their job. It’s because we aren’t doing our job. Because we’ve been in the way. We have not been open to accessing the faith that is already there.

Jesus implies this in the parable he tells in response to the apostle’s request. This is a rather cryptic vignette about a master and his slaves, with emphasis on the roles of each. Essentially, that each are destined for their own roles and are therefore dutybound to function according with those defined roles. The master has his duties, undefined in the parable, other than the acknowledgement that those duties do not include serving his slaves. And the slaves have their

duties, such as working in the fields or tending sheep, and then to prepare and serve meals for their master. Our own perspective on slavery notwithstanding, this was the order of things in Jesus' time. Masters and slaves each had their prescribed roles and duties, and ne'er the twain shall meet. That was the nature of things. Each class of persons had what was theirs to do by virtue of who they were. Their duties were inherent to who they were.

Jesus applies this to his apostles by saying, "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, the term "worthless" is very misleading here. As is sometimes the case, there just aren't any direct or easy translations for words in other languages. That is the case here. "The Greek word translated as 'worthless' . . . literally means a person to whom nothing is owed."¹ The intent of Jesus' statement is that the slaves are not owed anything for what they have done because it was their job. They were merely doing what they were supposed to do by virtue of their position.

Now, as applied to the apostles' request, and to the broader issue of our own faith, Jesus is essentially saying we already have what we need, we already have the faith that we need, by virtue of who God has created us to be. The capacity for faith is already there, by virtue of us being made in the image and likeness of God. This being the case, it is not a matter of having enough faith. It is not a matter of whether we think we have what it takes. It is not a matter of needing some exceptional level of devotion or piety. It is not a matter of questioning whether we are good enough or righteous enough to follow Jesus or to do what he asks of us.

Any perceived lack of faith is therefore due to the fact that we get in the way with our own expectations of what faith looks like, of what the Christian life looks like. Our own assumptions about what we should be doing. This is something that many Christians struggle with. We have this image of what it means to be a "good Christian" which is not always accurate. That we have to be perfect, that we can never get upset or angry, that we should never do anything wrong. And that if we do, we are not a very good Christian. And so we can become plagued with feelings of inadequacy. That we are not good enough. That we may not have what it takes. But that is not the case. That is an image that so many—Christian and non-Christian alike—have placed on us. But that is not the image that Jesus places on us. Jesus recognizes that we are human, that we are not perfect, that we can and do make mistakes. What Jesus asks of us is that we try. And Jesus has shown us how to do that through his teachings, through his actions, through the example of his own life and ministry. Over time, if we follow his example and his teachings, we will get better. We will live more fully into who God has created us to be.

The upshot of Jesus' response to his apostles—which also applies to all of us—is that we do not need more faith. We already have sufficient faith to do our job as his followers, and that it is our duty to operate out of that faith. We just need to find ways to tap into that faith that we have been given as beloved children of God. Our journey of faith is all about living into who we are as those made in the image and likeness of God. Our journey of faith is about living into who God has created and calls us to be. Our journey of faith is about allowing ourselves to tap into what faith we have, small though it may seem, to accomplish what God has invited us to do. Jesus' initial response to the apostles is "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."

Meaning that the faith we desire is already there. And no matter how small it may seem to us, that small amount is more than enough. If we just learn to tap into it, we would be capable of phenomenal things.

I know. Easier said than done. What is easy is that we tend to beat ourselves up when we are not able to live according to our assumptions, to live up to our expectations—however inflated they may be—of what our life as Christians should look like. Which is part of the problem in and of itself. Particularly in our post-Enlightenment age, we operate so much out of our heads. And faith is not something that is readily discerned and certainly not readily understood, by thinking about it. Faith is rooted in our soul, in our spirit, which is the direct connection to God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Faith is something that manifests itself in our daily lives through the promptings of our heart. Faith is something we just cannot adequately measure or analyze through our mental faculties.

Not that thinking about faith is not possible or unfruitful. It's just not the starting point for engaging our faith. Ultimately, as rational, thinking beings, what bubbles up through faith and tugs at our hearts must ultimately be put into action. So the fact that we tend to get stuck more in our heads when it comes to our lives of faith is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, where would we be, what type of Christians would we be, if we didn't have expectations about our own lives of faith and how we live those out? But at the same time, we need to be realistic and recognize we are human. We need to be gentle with ourselves. Which, there again, is just what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel reading. Being gentle with his apostles. Letting them know that they already have enough faith. That they already have what they need. That they are enough. They just need to get out of their own way. Get out of the way of their doubts about their abilities. Get out of the way of their questions about whether they are good enough. To allow the indwelling Spirit to do her job and gently guide us into how to live out of our faith.

In today's Gospel, the apostles say to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" How often do we make equivalent requests, in our hearts, in our thoughts, in our prayers? Jesus' response to the apostles and to us is that we don't need to have our faith increased. The life he calls us to does not require huge amounts of faith or some sort of super-faith. We already have sufficient faith. We already have what we need. All this is given to us from the very beginning because we are made in the image and likeness of God. This is our inheritance as God's beloved children. What we really need to do is get out of our own way. To recognize the truth of who we are and whose they are. And, with the gentle guidance of the indwelling Spirit, which is our direct connection to God and the real conduit for receiving our faith, we are invited to live into that reality. If we would dare believe that, if we would dare tap into that, just imagine what amazing things we might be able to achieve.

¹ "Little Faith: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Seventeenth Week after Pentecost," SALT, September 26, 2022. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/9/30/little-faith-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-seventeenth-week-after-pentecost>.