

Just a Mustard Seed...
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
Luke 17:1-10
World Communion Sunday
10-2-2016

If you read Luke's gospel carefully, you'll see that the disciples really are good people. They're a little young, and a little naïve, and they don't always follow through on their assignments, but they are good and decent. Give them credit. They left their homes, their families, their jobs, and any notion of stability, all to follow Jesus throughout the countryside.

But Jesus sets a new standard for living into God's covenant: Live with your whole self all the time.

The disciples seek to follow his example: they try to think of the most extravagant ways to love and forgive and serve. And each time they do, Jesus says, "Don't stop there! Love even more, forgive even more, pray even more!"

In today's lection, Jesus reminds his disciples of the virtues of forgiveness. He tells the disciples they must practice forgiveness in their lives – they must offer forgiveness to those who have wronged them, and accept the repentance of others. And when they've wronged others, they too must repent. Seven times a day if necessary.

In other words, Jesus tells them (and us as well) that forgiveness is a full-time vocation.

But forgiveness is hard!!!

University of Miami football coach Mark Richt, was a standout quarterback in high school. In college, he was a third-stringer. He rode the bench behind two future NFL quarterbacks. Thirty years into coaching, Richt admits that he no longer holds any grudges against his college coach for not getting playing time – "My teammates were better than me. I know that now. But. But that doesn't mean my mother has forgiven him!!! She still thinks I should have been the starter!!!"

Who among us can't relate to Mrs. Richt's feelings? Surely there's an old boss or high school sweetheart or authority figure or distant family member who will NEVER, EVER work their way back into our good graces. And if we're really honest, we may be that person for someone else.

But Jesus tells us to forgive. Again and again and again.

In response to such a command, the disciples say, "Lord, increase our faith!"

And if we're honest, we ask the same thing. Who among us has not uttered some version of the serenity prayer when faced with the challenge of offering grace and forgiveness to someone we'd rather not? "Lord, give me strength," we say.

Jesus responds to the disciples (and to us as well!) with a parable:

“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.”

If we’re not careful, we can tend to read Jesus’ response as a rebuke of the disciples. We hear: “If only each of you had faith, just a little faith, just an ounce, you could do miraculous things. Disciples, you need to get busy, and start believing a little harder!”

But I don’t think that’s what Jesus meant. Jesus is reminding the disciples that a tiny amount of faith can result in remarkable things. A mustard seed’s worth of faith, a little speck you can barely see, it’s got enough power to command a sturdy mulberry tree to jump in the sea and plant its roots.

In other words, Jesus reminds the disciples (and us as well!) that they’ve already got enough faith to live a life of forgiveness and service and love. A mustard seed’s worth is more than enough!

Think about that. A mustard-seed-portion of faith is enough to do what’s unthinkable, enough to bend the rules of physics. Jesus tells the disciples to make forgiveness a routine. We’ve all forgiven someone, even it’s been a marginal act of forgiveness. A lifetime of forgiveness is daunting, but certainly not impossible. It’s an accumulation of little things. Christ says we’ve got the tools to make it happen. We’ve got the gifts, we’ve got the energy, we’ve got the faith.

Too often, we only remember the first portion of Luke’s gospel. Yes, the disciples failed Jesus in his most desperate moments: his trial, his crucifixion, even his burial. During that last week, they lacked courage and patience. They were afraid. And they hid. And I’ll betcha that in their grief, they had a lot of pent-up resentment for their peers, for one another, and for their enemies. But you know what they didn’t lack? They didn’t lack enough faith. They weren’t quite yet sure how to channel their faith, but they didn’t lack it.

In Acts, the disciples, the ones who asked for more faith, finally learned how to channel the faith they had. They founded a church. And here’s what we know of that community:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

This morning, our community, and communities of faith around the world, will share in the act of Communion, a tradition embraced by the Acts Church, and first offered to the disciples by Christ himself. And this text seems so fitting. The disciples asked Christ for more faith in order to forgive. During his last meal, Christ offered all of himself, even forgiveness for those who would abandon him, betray him, and deny him. In the simple act of breaking bread, Christ told the disciples (and us as well!), I have faith in you. I have faith that you will create a community that can and will thrive, even in adversity, a community where you can love one another, and hurt one another, and forgive one another, and manage to love one another once more. I have faith that you can live in transformative relationships.

And it’s because of a few mustard seeds worth of faith, that Christians everywhere, join Christ once more this morning, to love and to serve and to forgive one another.