

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's lectionary reading is "framed by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, on one side, and the Samaritan leper on the other." Most of the teachings of Jesus on discipleship, like the ones that are the subject of this reading, may be summarized as follows: (1) don't be the cause of another's sin; (2) forgive, and then do it again; (3) minuscule faith is sufficient; and (4) discipleship is not about reward: Just do it.

Although this passage can strike one as little more than a "gathering up of isolated comments," it is actually quite a bit more than that. Luke uses these comments "to introduce the third announcement of Jerusalem as Jesus' final destination and to conclude his travel account."

So, this is a marker, and it helps to define the contours of the narrative. Luke wants us to understand that these things are said to the Twelve; in this way, he calls attention to the "*uncompromising demands of discipleship*." And these sayings have a common thread: they point towards the humility which true servants of Jesus must learn.

The heart of discipleship is duty. That is, duty in following the way of Jesus. It takes us away from what the world values. It calls for "unfailing forgiveness" which is not a mere option. It must "*always* be the response to repentance." Jesus is telling us that "when you forgive someone, you are making yourself their servant, not their master." In doing this, you are not scoring points. You are to be humble, to take no advantage of the situation, to give to the other person the generous and welcoming forgiveness that God has shown you in the first place."

The disciples seem to realize here that this may take more faith than they can muster, but it is not so much great faith in ourselves that matters, but faith in a God who can do *all things*. However, in v. 1 of the same chapter, Jesus admits that "occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone *by whom* they come!" What might those occasions be? Well, "not helping the poor right outside our doors is a stumbling, not sharing of one's abundant wealth is a stumbling. Not listening to 'Moses and the prophets' is a stumbling. Seeing poor, helpless Lazarus at Abraham's side, without any recognition that he had faith" is a stumbling.

In other words, when we *test the faith of others*, when we make it more difficult for them to believe, Jesus warns that it would be better for a millstone to become a collar to drag us to the bottom of the sea. Hyperbole, of course, but a warning from Our Lord and Savior all the same, a graphic illustration to get our attention.

And if we despair of ever having the faith and the courage to undertake this calling, we are reminded that in Jesus' final duty, the cross itself, "discipleship is vindicated...and the depth of God's mercy for us is revealed."

Jesus tells a short parable here, and it is a puzzling one. One of the things that makes it difficult to decode is that slavery was an accepted condition in the Greco-Roman world, and in the modern world it is almost universally condemned and made illegal. Thus, it is hard to imagine finding meaning about discipleship in such a relationship, but the point here is to illustrate the fact that when people develop great faith, "there is a danger that they may become prideful and puffed up." That is the point of the story, to address this concern.

Because of the very different society in which Jesus lived, it can be difficult to get beyond the notion that a slave never eats until the master has finished his meal. A slave would never be asked to join the master at table. To even think that this would be acceptable demonstrates the dangers of becoming prideful in pursuit of greater faith. Humility is a pre-requisite to having true faith. A disciple should never forget his position before God. His attitude can only be that of a humble and grateful servant who understands that service does not obligate God to him.

In the Bible, *"faith" primarily means personal loyalty, personal commitment, fidelity, and the solidarity that comes from such faithfulness.* So, the apostles are **NOT** asking Jesus here to increase their understanding or *their intellectual agreement.* They are asking Jesus to increase their loyalty to him. To increase their bonding with him.

And in response, Jesus says: *If you had trust in me the size of a mustard seed, you could do virtually anything.* Instead of assuming that Jesus is promising that if our faith is *big enough* we will be able to do miracles, let's consider the possibility that Jesus is criticizing us for thinking in the first place that faith and trust come in *sizes*, when Jesus has in fact been talking about the quality of faith, not its *volume*. This whole line of questioning and answering began with the Apostles saying, "Increase our trust! Increase our loyalty!" And what Jesus' response is really saying is something like this: *Trust, and loyalty, and bonding with me don't come in sizes. You either have it or you don't. You either are or you aren't.*

We know from the whole of Jesus' life and teachings, from his death and resurrection, that he isn't about casting mulberry trees into oceans, tying millstones around the necks of the unrighteous, or planting mustard seeds in order to reap a harvest of useless seeds (because the mustard seed plant is actually a noxious weed).

He speaks in metaphors, but the meaning is usually quite clear to those who follow his train of thought. Jesus is all about bringing into reality here on earth the realm of God. About demonstrating how to live as citizens of a distant land called the Kingdom of God, a world difficult for us to imagine but as real as God himself.

Almighty and everlasting God, pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Amen

Let me close by reminding everyone that today we honor the memory of St. Francis after this service with a short Blessing of the Animals ceremony at the altar in the memorial garden opposite the church.

Also, in honor of St. Francis, our offertory hymn this morning is #406 whose words were actually penned by Francis.

Sources: N.T. Wright, Luke for Everyone, SPCK, London, 2001;

Eugene C. Kreider, "The Politics of God: The Way to the Cross," *Texts in Context, Word & World*, June 1986, Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary;

David Ewart and George Hermanson, "Luke 17: 5-10 Year C Proper 22," *Holy Textures*, www.holytextures.com;

Brian Stoffregen, "Luke 17: 5-10, Proper 22, Year C," *Exegetical Notes*, Crossmarks Christian Resources, Yuma, AZ, brian.stoffregen@gmail.com