

Lectionary 27C — October 6, 2019

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

In today's gospel reading the disciples ask Jesus to give them more faith, which gives us the opportunity to ask what is faith anyway, and can one have "more" of it?

In the first place, Jesus seems to answer that question by saying that faith is not something you can quantify. When the disciples ask him to super-size their faith, they are asking the wrong question.

It's certainly an understandable question. If you look back two or three sentences, you can see that Jesus has just told them that they must keep on forgiving repentant members of the community AS MANY TIMES as such a person asks for forgiveness. Really? Every person who asks for forgiveness we're supposed to forgive? As many times as they ask? In the face of that expectation any reasonable person would ask for more faith.

But quantity — give us more! — is the wrong question. Jesus shifts the discussion from quantity to sufficiency. Faith the size of a mustard seed is sufficient for the work of discipleship.

Jesus uses a well-known illustration from daily life. Everybody was familiar with the teeny tiny mustard seed. It was only 1-2 millimeters around, yet produced a pretty big plant/shrub, perhaps as tall as ten feet. It was the perfect metaphor for small beginnings producing a big result.

The point is not quantity but sufficiency. A little faith will do it. I love how Ira Brent Diggers (who teaches at Lutheran Theological Seminary of the South) puts it: "God works through a modicum of faith to empower us to forgive even the most annoyingly repetitive sinners."¹

Jesus then turns to a second metaphor — one that can give us a little bit of indigestion. He suggests that faith is like the life of a slave/servant who works without the expectation of special treatment. "Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?" No, of course not. In doing his or her job, they are simply doing what is expected of them.

You probably know that "servant" is used often in the New Testament as a metaphor for discipleship. It's true, we are asked to obey our Lord/master, who himself came not to be served but to serve, and invites us to be servants as well. Obedient service of others in line with what Jesus models for us is an expectation of disciples. BUT is it really all drudgery as the phrase "worthless slave" seems to imply? "Just do your job, worthless disciple." Is that what Jesus is saying?

¹ "Luke 17:5-10 Commentary by Ira Brent Diggers - Working"

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4200. Accessed 2 Nov. 2019.

The word “worthless” is important — actually the key to unlocking the servant metaphor. We could just as easily (and probably should) translate the Greek word as “unworthy.” The point is not to denigrate the disciple but to clarify the nature of discipleship. In other words, being a disciple of Jesus does not make one worthy of any particular reward. We don’t follow Jesus, and try to live as he asks us to live, in order to collect ribbons, trophies, and fabulous prizes, but rather because our love for him moves us to love the world that he loves.

And that way of life is anything but drudgery. The scriptures frequently connect obedience with joy, like Psalm 119 — “Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.” In Luke’s gospel, again and again characters respond to the saving work of God in the ministry of Jesus with joy. The song of Servant Mary, sung as one of the theme songs at the beginning of the gospel, starts, “My soul proclaims your greatness, O God, and my spirit rejoices in you. You have looked with love on your servant here, and blessed me all my life through.”

To see ourselves as “unworthy” servants is also to be clear about what our service is for. It’s not for the sake of collecting rewards now, or later in heaven, but for the sake of those who need our service — need our love, compassion, kindness, support and help.

One final thing to note about the servant metaphor is the ordinariness of the work that it evokes: plowing the field, tending the sheep, preparing dinner. Jesus is trying to situate the work of discipleship in the context of ordinary, everyday life. The disciples assume that the kind of persistent forgiveness that Jesus is talking about is some kind of extraordinary act for which they need extraordinary faith. He’s trying to get them to see that it is not an extraordinary thing but part of the regular rhythm of daily life for disciples. Ira Brent Diggers again: “Forgiving the most repetitive (but repentant) sinner is no more extraordinary than the slave tending sheep or preparing dinner.” It’s what followers of Jesus do — everyday, as a way of life. They forgive. They share their bread with the hungry. They lift up the lowly. They bandage the wounds of strangers. They comfort the mourning. They show hospitality to strangers.

So in the context of all this, back to our original question: what is faith? Jesus seems to be saying that it is less our assent to doctrinal statements or confessions, and more about our love for him and our devotion to the way of life to which he invites us. Our commitment to the ongoing practice of forgiveness and all other acts of discipleship are a reflection of our faithfulness to Christ.

Someone once said we don’t think ourselves into a new way of living; rather, we live ourselves into a new way of thinking [Father Richard Rohr, I believe]. I see something like that in what Jesus is teaching here. Faith is first a way of living that may in time transform our way of thinking.

If you ever find yourself wondering if you have “enough” faith, I encourage you to remember the great saints of the mundane, like Andre of Montreal, who worked as a monastery porter, sacristan, and launderer. Or John the Gardener, who helped his local monastery with gardening

work, including growing flowers for the altar. May we all take up our call to be saints of the mundane — John the Teacher, Mary the Attorney, Joe the Custodian, Sue the Insurance Agent, George the Diaper Changer, Sally the Dog Walker — who see each ordinary task as an opportunity to live our faith. And in so doing, may we discover the extraordinary depth of God's love for us and for all those whom we are called to serve.