

Doing the Right Thing
A sermon preached by
Dean L. Francis
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Luke 17.1-4

Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ²It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

Luke 17:5-10

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶The Lord replied, “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. ⁷“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, 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!’”

Recently I read an article by Mark Sandlin, a Presbyterian pastor, that was entitled “10 Things The Church Can Learn from Geeks.” I have to tread lightly here this morning because I’m thinking there are some folks here today who would self-identify as Geeks.

Some might define Geeks as having obsessive devotion to some pursuit. Put another way it might be caring about something (computers, comics, Old English, rock climbing) more than society or social advancement. In his article Sandlin writes about the strangeness of the church, its language, its behavior, its “we are smarter than you” attitudes that might make the church the original Geek culture.

Those of us who have spent a fair amount of time in and around the church don’t always recognize this geeky behavior and sometimes we don’t effectively confront how our own “insider” language, scriptures, and stories can seem at best puzzling and at worst downright offensive. When we hear today’s passage and Jesus’ parable concerning slave-owners and their slaves, we assume that everyone knows that the church has renounced slavery as the evil that it is.

But then you might ask the question, “Why do we keep reading this stuff that seems to justify and support a slave owner’s authority over their slaves?” Our geeky response is that Jesus’ use of these slavery images was seeking to bring a message that had nothing to do with slavery itself.

But last week a United Nations group wrote,
“...the legacy of colonial history, enslavement, racial subordination and segregation, racial terrorism and racial inequality in the United States remains a serious challenge, as there has been no real commitment to reparations and to truth and reconciliation for people of African descent,” Contemporary police killings and the trauma that they create are reminiscent of the past racial terror of lynching.”¹

In the face of these realities, our geeky response seems difficult to translate to the outside world. And before we delve into our interpretations of the meaning and importance of this scripture it seems important that we at least recognize the difficulty before us.

Jesus’ story also confronts a difficult interpretive move. Just prior to this passage he says, “And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent’, you must forgive.” And the leaders gasp, Lord increase our faith! How can we do this? It’s impossible!

On its face Christ’s response is something between a challenge and a put-down. He tells them: *If your faith were the size of a mustard seed*, you would already have all the power you need to perform tremendous feats. The operative word here is: *If*. By definition *If* makes every subsequent statement conditional. It questions whether they have even the smallest measure of faith. However, an alternate translation puts Jesus’ remarks into a very different light. *If* was also commonly translated as “since.” And what a difference a single word can make. Instead of scolding the disciples for a total lack of faith, this construction recognizes that the disciples’ faith, while miniscule, could still be very powerful... if only they would use it. And to mix parables, Jesus tells us earlier in Luke 13, that faith like a tiny mustard seed has the potential to flower full-blown into the kingdom of God.

Jesus has called the disciples and they have followed. They will go on to survive betrayal and despair. By the power of the Holy Spirit they will carry their fragile faith to the corners of the known world.

And on the way, as they exercise it, their faith will become more and more robust; so much so that all but Judas and John will follow Jesus to their own martyrs’ deaths. In this gospel, Jesus is telling them to trust him, not to doubt, not to ask for more proof. They have all the faith they need. Don’t ask for more. Use the faith you have.

¹ Ishaan Tharoor, “U.S. owes black people reparations for a history of ‘racial terrorism,’ says U.N. Panel,” Washington Post, September 27, 2016

In a world where the grand and large seems to always take precedence over the small, it is difficult to trust in this lesson. We have been conditioned to believe that bigger is always better but of course we know this isn't always the case. Recently I saw a video about a man in Detroit who seems to tell this lesson well. Tom Nardone decided to cut the grass in some of the city parks that had been closed. He bought a large riding mower on Craig's List and just started mowing one park at a time. In some of these parks the grass was waist high, so kids couldn't swing on the swing set and teams couldn't practice their sport. He says that many times there are kids in these park using the playground equipment even before he's done. Others soon joined him in this endeavor and they formed the MowerGang. Tom says they are like a biker gang, only with mowers.

That kind of mustard seed work is happening all around our community. A few diapers that make a big difference. A meal served by a caring volunteer. A visit to a person who is lonely. A safe place to talk for a youth who feels different or unappreciated. Our temptation is to ask, "Lord how can we have the faith to do this?" And Jesus says, "You already have it. Now you just need to do the right thing."