

Year C Proper 22
Lamentations 1:1-6
Psalm 137
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10
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Once again the lessons today are challenging, but once again I think that if we look at the Gospel, we can find inspiration in the two, rather startling images that Luke uses. The apostles ask for Jesus to increase their faith, and he tells them these two stories—having faith as big as a mustard seed, and the story of the master and the slave. These two are yoked together here because Jesus wants to show the apostles that they already have enough faith to be able to do what he’s asking of them. It’s not about how *much* faith we have, it’s about how we live out our faith in the context of relationships.

First, I want to remind us of what came before this passage in Luke, because context is always important. The reason the apostles ask for Jesus to increase their faith in the first place is because a few verses before this, he has just told them that they need to be good examples, and never to be a cause of stumbling to new believers—or any of the disciples, for that matter. Then Jesus also says that *forgiving* one another is absolutely crucial; he says “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.” It is the challenge of forgiveness on that scale that makes the apostles so anxious, and what prompts them to ask for more faith.

So in answer to that Jesus, very lovingly, says, “you already have enough faith to do this!” To illustrate this, he uses the metaphor of faith as a mustard seed. If you’ve ever seen a mustard seed, you know it’s tiny—about the size of the tip of a ballpoint pen. So Jesus is saying that a **speck** of faith is enough—don’t beat yourself up about how much faith you have, or don’t have. The amount of faith that you have right now is enough to accomplish incredible things like uprooting trees and planting them in the sea. Now this is a metaphor, remember? He doesn’t literally mean that we should do this, or that faith gives you superhero powers over the natural world. No—what he is saying, is that the speck of faith you do have will enable to do remarkable things like *forgiving* others again and again, and *living* a holy life. He’s not condemning the apostles for not having enough faith—he’s saying you have more faith than you realize, and what you already have can enable you to do great things.

But the *point* of faith is in living it out in right relationship. Which is why Jesus tells this parable about the master and slave, as an illustration. It needs some context, too, but it’s historical, rather than biblical context. Especially for our twenty-first century American ears, a bit of discussion of slavery is necessary, otherwise it’s hard for us to even get past that word. During the time and place when Jesus lived, slavery was a fact of life. People owned slaves in the same way that we own lawnmowers and washing machines, and people became slaves for many different reasons. For instance, people sometimes sold themselves into slavery to pay off debts. People also could become slaves as a result of having their country conquered. Some people were born into servitude, because their mother was a slave. And this condition was absolutely not based on race, either—people of all races, and all trades, could have the misfortune to be enslaved. For instance,

the Roman senator Cato owned highly educated Greek slaves to tutor his children—which was actually a bit of a status symbol. If you owned a slave, your obligation was to feed, clothe and house that person, and the obligation of the slave was to do the work you told them to do—no **thanks** was expected. This was an accepted situation, and if you became a slave for some reason, you knew this. I'm not making value judgements on the ethics of the situation, I'm simply trying to describe it, because you can see that Jesus takes it for granted that his listeners already know all of this.

So Jesus is describing a situation where the slave and the master are each performing their expected roles in their relationship. The slave does the farm work, and serves the master at table, and the master takes care of the slave—no thanks are involved, or expected. In this parable, the apostles are meant to identify with the slave, and see that God is the master. They would see that they are called upon to obey the commandments of God—like forgiving our neighbor—not because of any thanks or reward that God might give them, but because it is in the relational covenant. Actually, the apostles have a better deal than the slave in the story, because God doesn't just take care of basic physical needs, but loves them, and sustains them. But again, Jesus is saying that it's not about faith—that misses the point. The point is about living in right relationship with God, and with one another. And Jesus models this for the apostles. Remember, even though he was **God**, he came “not to be served, but to serve.” (Matt. 20:28, Mark 10:45)

So if we have enough faith already, and we are called upon to obey God and live in right relationship with God and with one another, what does that look like?

Many of you know that I work full-time as the lead chaplain for Valley Health, and that I spend most of my time at Winchester Medical Center. My pastoral care work there is done mostly in one of the four critical care units. A while ago I met a woman, who I'll call Mary, whose elderly father was on life support. As we talked and prayed for her father, she shared that he was the only family member she had left, because her mother had died of cancer many years before. Mary was worried that the therapy we were trying to save her father's life wouldn't work, and then she would lose her father—and be left “an orphan” as she put it. After three days, it became clear that the therapy was not working. In a family meeting, the doctors asked what Mary's father would want them to do, if he could know that he was not going to get better. “Oh, he told me if that happened, he would want me to let him go,” she said heavily. “He would want me to tell you to take all that stuff off of him.” She asked for some time to think about things, and she and I sat together in silence for a while.

Suddenly she said, “I should probably call my sister.”

“Your sister?” I said. “I thought it was just you and your Dad now.”

“Well, it is,” she said awkwardly. “My sister and I haven't talked since my Mom died.” She went on to explain that she, her father, and her sister Anne had argued about where to bury her mother, had said some terrible things to one another, and Anne had left. In all these years, they had never spoken again. “I'm not even sure I can get hold of her,” she said doubtfully. I encouraged her to try. “She probably won't talk to me,” Mary said. “But somehow she does need to know that Dad isn't going to make it.”

As you might have guessed, Mary was able to speak to her sister, and much to her amazement, Anne wanted to come to Winchester, and be present at the end of her father's life. At first Mary wasn't sure she wanted Anne to come, but eventually she agreed. When Anne arrived, I was with them for a while at their father's bedside, and I saw that this togetherness wasn't easy for them, at all. For instance, they were exquisitely polite to one another, and awkwardly self-conscious in their attempts not to offend one another. They were both determined to work things out this time, though—that was clear. So they **both** stayed with their father until he took his last breath.

A couple of months later I got a card from Mary, who reported that she and Anne were doing “as well as could be expected,” with their grief, but that they now had each other for support. However, she wrote “Anne and I have a lot of old stuff to work through. This ‘loving one another’ thing is really hard work.”

And it is hard work. Loving one another, respecting one another, forgiving one another. It is hard work, and it takes faith. But we have all we need, if we will simply live it.

Amen