

“Increase our faith!”

Psalm 137 and Luke 17:5-10

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Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

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In your pew Bible there is sub-heading just before our scripture reading for today, and the subheading is **“some sayings of Jesus.”**

Now, as you probably know, it was the Bible publisher, not Luke, who added those words. The Bible publisher thought it was a good idea to break up the text and make it easier to read. Which is understandable, I suppose.

But those words – **“some sayings of Jesus”** – make these verses sound as though they are less important, or random, or put here for no reason.

And I want you to see this morning that nothing could be farther from the truth. These are very important words, and we should know what they mean.

Beginning with verse 1...

Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ² It 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. ³ Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴ 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.”

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶ The 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’? ⁸ Would 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’? ⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰ So 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!’”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Not long after I moved to Switzerland – what I am about to tell you happened in the first couple of months – I woke up one morning, and I realized that my teeth were clenched...like a vise. In fact, my whole jaw was sore, which means that I had probably clenched my teeth for a good part of the night.

And as I woke up, I remember thinking about someone I know who had betrayed me, someone I trusted who been cruel and uncaring and unfeeling. It had been a terrible time in my life.

And by the way, this is not a good way to wake up. And just so you know, it's very rare. Which is a good thing because it's not particularly good for the teeth, but more than that it's not good for the soul.

So, I went to sit alone in the dark, which is what I do most mornings – it's my quiet time – and I started to remember in considerable detail everything that had happened, every word that had been spoken, every bit of anger and rage that I had felt. All of it came tumbling back.

And as I sat there I would alternate between being angry with myself for having trusted this person. I kind of knew at the beginning that I should not have trusted, but I did, because I thought it was the right thing to do. But then I would flip over into anger that another human being could act so badly. What happened was evil, pure evil.

What was odd, I thought, as I sat there that morning, was that my feelings were so fresh and raw. They were eating at me. They were robbing me of sleep. I had not yet let go of this thing that had happened. Not even moving across the ocean was enough to put it behind me.

I suppose that if you live long enough, someone will betray you. Someone will act badly toward you. Someone – and it's often someone we know quite well – someone will act in ways that leave you shaken to the core of your being.

After something like that happens, you never want to trust another human being again. It's too awful.

Anyway, it was at that point that my faith spoke. Faith has a way of waiting for the right moment to speak, have you ever noticed?

The first voice I listen to is seldom my faith. The first voice is usually my hurt and anger and self-pity. But when those things finally subsided, I heard my faith speak. And it was a still, small, soft voice.

And it said, **“Doug, this might be an excellent time to forgive, to get on with your life, to start sleeping through the night again.”**

I should tell you that I am very good at staying mad. Just telling this story over again feels good. I don't even need to tell you the name of the person. I've got this outraged, injured party thing down.

There is something delicious, isn't there, about holding something like this over another person?

I'm right, I know I'm right, and you're wrong. It feels so good.

And if I had been following Jesus all over the countryside two thousand years ago, listening to his teaching, hanging on his every word, I would have had a hard time with what he says to his disciples in our scripture reading for today.

Jesus, I'm afraid, had this way of being uncomfortably direct. Not all the time, but most of the time. I like it when he talks in generalities, when he says something like **"blessed are the peacemakers."** We can all feel good about that. Or, **"Come to me all you who are weary and overburdened, and I will give you rest."** I like that. And if only he had made more statements like that.

But here, in the verses I read for you today, Jesus suddenly gets all direct and personal with us. He's telling us how to live our lives. And frankly, I get uncomfortable when he does that, don't you?

He is saying to me that if a person betrays me and acts badly toward me, that I should be ready to forgive that person.

The disciples – you have to love them – the disciples here in this story, as in so many other places, are clueless. They listen, but they don't comprehend.

So, they seem to say, in response to this, **"Well, okay. But we're not spiritually equipped for that. We're weak in our faith. And we get mad sometimes. When people drive badly, we let them know. Maybe if we were really 'Christian' – and I know they didn't have that word, but you know what I mean – maybe if we were really 'Christian,' we'd be able to forgive all those people who have hurt us and betrayed us."**

And then Jesus says something that most of us have heard before, but I'm guessing that most of us never really understood what Jesus is getting at. He hears them say, **"If only we had more faith."**

What they say, literally, of course is, **"Lord, increase our faith. Give us more of it so that we can do these heroic things, like forgiving other people."**

And to that Jesus says, **"If you had faith the size of a mustard seed – so small it's practically invisible to the human eye – if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could make trees walk."**

Now, here's my guess. If we've heard those words before, we've assumed – tell me if I've got this wrong – we've assumed that Jesus is criticizing the disciples, or he's chastising them, rebuking them, or telling them they need something more than they have.

And what I want you to see today – because this is such an important biblical truth – what I want you to see is that Jesus says nothing of the kind. He's not criticizing them. He's telling them that they already have what they need. They have all the faith they need to start living differently.

They don't need more faith. What they need to do is use the faith they have.

Ten years ago – almost to the day – it was October 2, 2006 – a man named Charles Carl Roberts IV backed his pickup truck to the front of an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in the U.S. Maybe some of you have heard this story.

The Amish are Christians who came to the United States from Switzerland in the middle of the 18th century, and they settled in Pennsylvania, where they continue to live as people did 300 years ago – no electricity, no cars or tractors for their farms. They get everywhere they need to go by using horse and buggy. They are a unique and fascinating people.

There are now around 250,000 of them in the U.S.

According to the news reports, Charles Carl Roberts told the boys in the schoolhouse that they could leave, and then he ordered the girls, who were ages 6 to 13, to line up against the wall. And after a while, he shot all of them, killing five of them, and critically wounding the rest, before turning the gun on himself.

It was (and still is) an absolutely horrific story. Senseless violence. Unimaginable pain and loss. Too terrible to think about.

But what captured the attention of the country in the hours after the shooting – the incident would certainly have been news anyway – but what captured the attention of the whole country was the response of the Amish community, these backward Christian people.

We think of them curious to begin with – because of their strange way of living – but their response to what happened was utterly unexpected.

One of the first people to be interviewed, only a couple of hours after police secured the scene, was the grandfather of one of the girls, and he said, **“We must not think evil of this.”** Can you imagine yourself saying that? **“We must not think evil of this.”**

To which, most of us would have said, **“Well, if it’s not evil, what do we call it?”**

Then, the father of one of the girls who had been killed was interviewed later that same evening, and he said, referring to the shooter, **“He had a mother and a wife and a soul, and now he’s standing before a just God.”**

Another Christian, also from Lancaster County, said to a reporter, **“I don’t think there’s anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts.”**

A few hours after the shooting, an Amish neighbor went over to the home of the shooter and comforted his wife and family, extending forgiveness to them.

And I can’t leave out this one, last detail.

The Amish community in Lancaster County set up a charitable fund for the children of the shooter to make sure that they did not suffer because of what their father had done.

I remember telling that story in a sermon soon after the incident, and after the service a church member came to the door where I was greeting.

And she said, **“Well, we’re not Amish. How can we be expected to respond like that? They live their whole lives so differently.”**

And at the time I thought she had a point. Of course, they’re different from you and me, aren’t they, with their quaint customs and so on? How can we be expected to be anything like them?

But then I hear Jesus saying, in these verses, **“You have everything you need. You are already equipped.”**

Jesus says something else in these verses that I’d like us to see.

What Jesus means to say here, I think, is this: **“When you’ve done your job of forgiving, when you’ve gone out of your way to forgive, don’t come back and expect a pat on the back for doing it. ‘Here’s a medal of honor, Doug, to pin on your shirt.’”**

No Jesus is saying, **“Don’t pretend that you’re a super disciple, just because you found it in your heart to forgive someone. This is what you do. Don’t expect applause or standing ovation. If you follow me, you will do this and more on a daily basis.”**

A friend of mine, a very fine preacher, has reflected on these verses, and he was reminded of the Lord’s Prayer, where we say, **“Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”**

And my friend wondered, **“Could Jesus be making a connection here between bread and forgiveness? The prayer makes it sound as though we need both every day. Daily bread *and* daily forgiveness.”**

Forgiving is not something we do occasionally, when we’re feeling really strong in our faith, when we’re feeling particularly generous. Forgiveness ought to be something we do as routinely as sitting down to eat.

Why do we forgive? Because that’s what Christians do.

Let me point out that, if you are surprised to me hear me say that, you shouldn’t be.

Because, you see, at the very heart of the Christian faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our faith is built on the foundation of forgiveness – and it is a costly forgiveness at that.

Without the cross and what we believe was accomplished there, we have no faith. Forgiveness is who and what we are. It’s our identity. It’s not something we choose to do when we’re good and ready. We do it because we ourselves have been forgiven, because we ourselves live every day in a state of grace.

Now, let me make two comments about forgiveness that probably need to be made every time we talk about this subject.

First, forgiveness never excuses the offense that’s been committed. Never. When you forgive someone, you’re not saying, **“Oh, forget it. It was nothing. Really. Don’t even think about it.”**

No. That’s not forgiveness. Something is missing from that equation.

Forgiveness – and I mean *real* forgiveness – the kind that leads to reconciliation and healing and new life, that kind of forgiveness always takes seriously the pain and the hurt that has occurred.

And so, if someone hurts you, or takes advantage of you, or treats you as though you somehow matter less, then you get to say, **“Yes, that hurt. I felt diminished by what you said (or did). But for your sake (and my sake too), I’m going to release you. I’m going to forgive you.”**

When that Amish father told the newspaper reporter that the shooter was standing before a “just God,” he wanted the shooter to be held accountable. He wasn’t asking for revenge – at least that’s not the way it sounded to me – but he didn’t want to overlook what happened either.

Here’s something else – a second comment I want to make. Forgiveness always means surrendering the right to revenge. If you’ve been hurt or wronged by another person, the need to fight back is going to be strong. Human beings are wired up to want something in return.

And it’s not wrong to feel that way.

But here’s the thing. Sometimes that desire for revenge – to get even – just eats us up. You and I can be consumed by it. I have known people who have spent years dwelling on some injustice that they have suffered because of something that someone else did. And church people, as you know, are not immune from this.

And to be honest, sometimes it feels good. It’s not healthy, of course, but it can feel good ... to be right, to have the moral high ground, to feel superior.

So, when we forgive someone, we’re letting go of something important to us. We let go of debt that someone owes to us. Which is why, I think, that Presbyterians like to say, “**forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.**” That’s how I learned to say the Lord’s Prayer.

And if it’s true forgiveness, then every tiny bit of that debt is written off. At that point, you’re out of the collection business.

And what happens – usually – is that an enormous burden is lifted. There is nothing quite like the relief of it. If you don’t have to be mad anymore, you find that you can breathe again. You can begin to live and experience life.

You don’t forget, but you let go.

Tell me, where in your life is there a need to forgive?

Call to mind the most difficult and conflicted relationship in your life right now, and as you remember what God in Jesus Christ has done for you, I hope you will let it go.

Whatever it is.

And when you do it, don’t expect Jesus to come running over with a medal of honor or even a pat on the back.

This is what we do. We’re like the Amish in that way. This is who we are. We do it so that we can live. Difficult words. But words that are the center of our faith.

Let us pray: God, help us to do what you have already given us the faith to do. Take away our excuses. Convict us of the need to be right. And then let us live...let us live the life you have given to us. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.