

Sunday, October 2 – 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Sermon Title: “If you had faith the size of a microdot...”

Scripture Reading: Luke 17:1-10

(The second reading for Sunday will be Psalm 137. Please take time to read this psalm. It has become an important one to me in the last few months, as world events – and events back home in the U.S. – leave me discouraged. As you’ll see, the people had been taken exile and find themselves in a foreign land, where they are depressed and despondent. “How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? Vs. 4)

Note: We are making our way through Luke’s gospel, and we have come upon some verses that seem oddly disconnected from what we find before and after. The sub-heading in my Bible says that they are “sayings of Jesus,” which sums it up nicely. I am going to read only vs. 5-10 in worship next Sunday – and focus on the “if you had faith the size of a mustard seed” saying - but I encourage you to read vs. 1-10.

1. In vs. 1 Jesus speaks to his “disciples,” but in vs. 5 those disciples suddenly become “apostles.” The word “apostles” is the one that is out of place here. The disciples (those who follow) became apostles (those who are sent out) only later – after Jesus’ death and resurrection. So, the use here is odd. Some say that these sayings are really directed to Luke’s Christian readers. Perhaps there is nothing all that important to see here, but I want you to read carefully and ask questions as you go. (Not every question will yield fruit!)
2. The Greek word *skandalon* – translated “occasions for stumbling” – is hardly ever found in classical Greek, but it does occur a few times in NT Greek. The meaning here is an “enticement to apostasy or abandonment of allegiance to God.” In the early days of the church, apparently, it was not unusual that new believers fall away from the faith or be tempted by false teaching. (Some scholars say that Lent originally developed as a 40-day period of fasting and repentance for those who wanted to be restored to the Christian community. Should the word *skandalon* be in the believers’ vocabulary today?)
3. In vs. 4-5, Jesus turns to the issue of forgiveness and restoration (after being very critical of those who were taken in by “occasions for stumbling”). He seems to say to those who were strong enough not to sin that they should “get off their high horse” and be quick to forgive. Vs. 3 “If there is repentance, you must forgive.” I hope I am not presumptuous when I ask this question, but aren’t we always a little slow to forgive? God is expected to forgive immediately – upon being asked! – but human beings take their time before accepting apologies and forgiving. Have you noticed? Why is that? What is our reluctance to forgive? (BTW, at least one scholar I consulted this week suggests the use of “apostles” here is a clue that difficulty with forgiveness will continue into the early church – the so-called “apostolic” period.)
4. By the way, the word “rebuke” in vs. 3 carries with it the nuance of a frank, but gentle admonition. This is suggested instead of nursing a grudge. I mention this because we often take “rebuke” to mean something far stronger.
5. Vs. 5 – I love this request from the apostles – “Increase our faith!” In other words, give us more than we have, add to what is already there. What was it the disciples believed at this point – and what more were they hoping for? Did they have faith that Jesus was the son of God, eternal with the Father, existing before the creation of the universe, born of the Virgin Mary? Probably not – that would all come later – so what did they believe? And what would an increase have looked like?
6. Vs. 6 – **“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed...”** – First, let’s be clear about the actual size of a mustard seed. It’s extraordinarily small. So, what is Jesus saying? Interestingly, he is contradicting their claim to have *some* faith, isn’t he? They think they have some faith and want Jesus to increase it. And Jesus says, “If you had just a tiny amount, you could do extraordinary things!” So, what is Jesus encouraging them to do? Among other things, he is reminding them of how urgent their need really is. They are overestimating what they already have, and Jesus is reminding them that their reservoir of faith is shockingly small. But Jesus is also encouraging them – isn’t he? – to ask for more.

I think it's important to point out here that faith is a gift. It's not something that we conjure up on our own. It's not something we store up for a bad day. Faith – as the Bible describes it and as Jesus imagines it – is a gift. It comes from outside ourselves. To receive faith is to receive something by grace. In other words, it is a free gift.

Think about how you understand faith. Most people think they have to grow their own, don't they? Or they feel bad that their faith is so weak and insubstantial. But here Jesus is telling us that we should be praying for faith, praying for the gift that will lead to other things, amazing things, miraculous things.

Do you ever pray for faith?