

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Psalms 37:1-9

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

10/02/2022

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

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!'"

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Faith

Good Morning! We have a tough Gospel lesson today. Not only is it hard to follow, but the analogy at the end of the text is shocking to our

modern ears. Jesus uses language about slavery that is strangely comfortable and accepting of the situation. So, before we can dive into the text, we need to address that first.

While slavery in the first century was complicated, it was not the ethnically focused slavery of the United States. BUT! It was still slavery, and it was still cruel, and it was still degrading... so why does Jesus seem to be so comfortable with it? This is the same man who just a short time ago told the story of a rich man who went to Hades, while the poor man was taken to Abraham.

Most commentaries don't address the issue, other than pointing to the troubling problems the text raises. But in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* we see an interesting perspective. The scholar Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder points out that it was important to the writer of Luke that the Gospel seem, if not sympathetic, at least non-threatening to the Roman Empire and the powers that be. Crowder writes that "*Luke presents himself in this light so as not to arouse the suspicion of Roman authorities or to put himself or his community in danger. The subversion occurs through Luke's realization that though he is less than others, one greater than he (and others!) has come to set him and those enslaved like him free.*"¹

It's a distracting example, one that shocks us and proves to be disconcerting. It makes us uncomfortable when Jesus says or seems to be accepting of behavior we deem un-Christian...

¹ Blount, Brian K., et al. *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 177.

So, let us turn our focus to the message within those words, what is Jesus trying to tell us? Our assigned lesson from the Revised Common Lectionary only gives us verses 5-10, but all scholars agree that one should look at 1-10 to get a broader picture. So, let's look at the handout from the New English Translation with verses 17:1-10.

*“Jesus said to his disciples, “Stumbling blocks are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! **2** It would be better for him to have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. **3** Watch yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. **4** Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times returns to you saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” **5** The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” **6** So the Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this black mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled out by the roots and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. **7** “Would any one of you say to your slave who comes in from the field after plowing or shepherding sheep, ‘Come at once and sit down for a meal’? **8** Won’t the master instead say to him, ‘Get my dinner ready, and make yourself ready to serve me while I eat and drink. Then you may eat and drink’? **9** He won’t thank the slave because he did what he was told, will he? **10** So you too, when you have done everything you were commanded to do, should say, ‘We are slaves undeserving of special praise; we have only done what was our duty.’”*

The text is most likely a collection of sayings from Jesus that were gathered and woven together by the writer of Luke so that they would have a cohesive center. BUT it seems that this isn't the writer's best work. As

Stephanie Messick pointed out on Monday, the story seems disjointed, unconnected. Well, it turns out that's because it is!

At the heart of these sayings is a common theme of community. Luke Timothy Johnson notices a thematic thread. The reader has been conditioned throughout the Gospel to identify with the poor and weak. But our text today shifts the scandal internally. He writes that *“Even in the kingdom there is opportunity for scandal and the need for repentance and forgiveness. The demand placed by Jesus on his followers is that they are themselves responsible for both; they cannot plead innocence because they are oppressed by others. If they cause scandal, they will be punished for it. If they are sinned against, they must forgive.”*²

The NET does a better job in this opening lesson, pointing out that use of “stumbling blocks” instead of “sin” does a better job of conveying the point that the problem is leaders or community members who make the Christian life harder for newcomers, or “little ones.”

Which brings us to our assigned lesson. One scholar writes that *“It is no wonder that the apostles, upon hearing the instructions in verses 1-4, say to Jesus, “Increase our faith!”* Jesus says that it's not a question of the amount of faith, but the type and quality. With faith as small as a mustard seed, one could move a whole tree to the sea. The black mulberry tree mentioned was known for its extensive root system and was notoriously hard to dig up. It's not the size of our faith, but a simpler question of action.

I got lucky this week. I was struggling with the text, and happened to open up a commentary that I don't normally use that I keep at my house. It was written over 30 years ago and was a gift from Pastor Gunderlach. I

² Johnson, Luke T., and Daniel J. Harrington. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 261.

opened it up and saw what he underlined what may have been decades ago. *“What vs. 10 requires is not a degrading confession of sin, but love that knows that its duty is never done.”*³ Where the New Revised Standard Version talks about worthless slaves, the NET conveys the point more clearly. “We are slaves undeserving of special praise.” Gunderlach’s commentary continues: *“A disciple of Jesus is not ‘worthless’ because he is nothing and can do nothing but because he can never begin to fulfill everything that is left to do.”*⁴

That, my friends, is the core of our mission. The job is hard, but rewarding. We have been given the faith to see it done, and we stand as witness to the miracle that God has already accomplished, that we have been set free. This is the good news. Amen.

³ Schweizer, Edward. *The Good News According to Luke*. (D. E. Green, Trans.). John Knox Press, 1984. p. 264.

⁴ Ibid.