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Faith Works

Luke 17: 1-10

The gospels speak powerfully to me, particularly when I read what they have to say about the disciples. Because when I look at the disciples, I can relate!

In many ways, these guys are a lot like me. They spend much of their time misunderstanding, misinterpreting, misconstruing Jesus' words, taking missteps and making mistakes. In short, they spend a lot of time just plain missing it. They don't understand much of what Jesus has to say to them about the Kingdom of God. His parables often go right over their heads, even when he tries to explain them more clearly. At one point Jesus says, "How can you have been with me for so long, and still you don't understand what I'm trying to tell you?" They ask inappropriate questions, like "Who among us will be the greatest in the Kingdom and who gets to sit at your right hand and at your left?" They intervene at all the wrong times; first, trying to keep little children from coming to Jesus. To which he replies, "No, let them come to me and, as a matter of fact, you need to learn to be more like these children." They intervene again, trying to stop a little boy from offering his basket of loaves and fishes to Jesus and we know what happens next: Jesus turns that offering into enough food to feed over 5,000 people. They want to keep Jesus from rolling away the stone in front of Lazarus' tomb.

They even want to prevent Him from going to Jerusalem at the feast of the Passover, not understanding that Jesus had been preparing for that day for quite some time. Try as they might, more often than not, the disciples just can't get it right. And when I hear the stories of the disciples, I'm encouraged, because I think if there was hope for them, then there might also be hope for someone like me. But in spite of all their shortcomings, one thing the disciples **did** get right, and surely it's the most important thing: once they'd been with Jesus, they knew there was nowhere else to go to find what they'd experienced with Him. There was nowhere else to go to find the **life** they found with him. So they kept following, sometimes hesitating, sometimes complaining, sometimes even doubting, but they followed Him because somehow they knew it was the right thing to do, it was the only thing to do.

Yes, I can relate to the disciples. I see myself reflected in many of their thoughts and words and actions. So when they say to Jesus, in today's passage in Luke, "Lord, increase our faith," I'm right there with them, thinking, "Finally, they're getting it right." After all, asking Jesus to increase their faith *has* to be the right thing to do. So, I'm asking right along with them, "Yes Lord, increase my faith too."

It seems like the right kind of request and yet, Jesus doesn't respond in quite the way I would have anticipated. He doesn't jump for joy and congratulate them on their theological acuity. In fact, his response is surprising. It almost sounds like a rebuke. "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea', and it would obey you." In other words, Jesus is saying, "If you just have a little bit of faith, like the tiniest of seeds, and you put that faith to work, you could perform marvelous signs and wonders." And then he goes on to tell this rather curious story of the slave who works hard all day long in the fields. Jesus asks, "When he has finished, do you invite him in immediately for a meal?" No. You make him prepare your dinner and serve you. And then he can eat. In fact, you don't even thank him because he's only doing what's expected of him. Jesus tells his disciples, this is the way it is for a slave and this is how it ought to be for you. In a nutshell, do what you're supposed to do. Wow... That does sound kind of harsh! I'll bet right about then, the

disciples were thinking, maybe we should have phrased that a bit differently. Maybe we should have said, “Increase our faith, *please*.”

No, we all know that it wasn't simply a matter of the disciples asking politely. Something else is going on here. How are we to understand this seemingly harsh rebuke by Jesus of his disciples? First of all, if we look at what immediately precedes the request by the disciples for an increase of faith, we discover that Jesus is talking about forgiveness. He says if your brother sins against you seven times a day and repents, then you should forgive him.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says we should be willing to forgive, not just seven times a day, but seventy times seven. In other words, we should not keep a count of the wrongs against us, but instead, we should always be ready and willing to offer forgiveness. No wonder the disciples responded by saying, “Lord, increase our faith!” They're not so different from you and me and they knew that it's sometimes pretty difficult to forgive.

They knew that they were incapable of offering that kind of limitless forgiveness on their own, that they would need an increase in faith if they were ever going to succeed at it.

We've all known someone who had a difficult time forgiving a wrong that was committed against them. Maybe we've even been there ourselves.

We've seen the kind of anger and bitterness that can take root where there is a lack of forgiveness. And the isolation and pain that such bitterness can produce. It's no wonder then that Jesus has so much to say about forgiveness. “If you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” Yet even understanding the importance of forgiveness and knowing the damage that a lack of forgiveness can do, doesn't always make it easier for us to forgive.

Sometimes *trying harder* to forgive just doesn't seem to work. Sometimes what's required is a little more faith – if by faith, we mean remembering that by the grace of Jesus Christ, **I** have been forgiven. If by faith, we mean surrendering our anger and bitterness, asking God to take them from us, so that He can create in us, some space for love and forgiveness. If by faith, we mean trusting God to give us even the *desire* to forgive. Then yes, maybe the disciples were right in asking for an increase in faith.

So why does Jesus seem to respond so negatively? Why doesn't He just say, “You're right, you can't always forgive on your own, you need more faith, so ZAP, here it is!” Well, aside from the fact that I don't think God operates very often by zapping us (and we can probably be thankful for that), in this encounter with the disciples, I think what Jesus is trying to teach them is that it's not so much a question of *how much* or *how little* faith they have. An *increase* in faith is not necessarily what's required. It's more a question of taking whatever measure of faith you have and of putting that faith, even the tiniest little bit of faith, into action. It's what they **do** with their faith that counts.

When I was a student at Furman, I attended First Baptist in Taylors pretty regularly with a group of my friends. On a couple of occasions, while I was there, I got to hear Corrie Ten Boom speak because that church was home to her when she wasn't traveling and speaking other places. You might remember that she and her family hid Jews in their home during World War II until they were arrested and sent to Nazi concentration camps. Corrie was 52 and unmarried when she was arrested with her elderly father and her older sister, Betsy. She lost her freedom, her dignity, and eventually saw her sister and her father die in those concentration camps. Corrie was released, she later discovered due to a clerical error, just one week before other women her age were executed at Ravensbruck. I heard Corrie tell a lot of memorable stories, but the one that had perhaps the greatest impact on me was a story she told about forgiveness. From her

book, *The Hiding Place*, here is that story in her own words: It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former SS man who stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly, it was all there, the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face. He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. "How grateful I am for your message, Frauline", he said. "To think, as you say,

He has washed my sins away." His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I who had preached so often the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man. Was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. I tried to smile. I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again, I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness. As I took his hand, the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder, along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on God's. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, he gives, along with the command, the love itself.

This poignant story is evidence to me that faith, even in small measure, is an unbelievably powerful force when it's put into action.

During Jesus' ministry, he heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, makes the lame to walk, cleanses lepers and casts out demons and somehow faith always seems to play a part.

Sometimes it's the faith of the one being healed, and sometimes, like in the case of the paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof by his friends, it's because of the faith of others. When Jesus performs these signs and wonders during his earthly ministry, somewhere, somehow, faith has something to do with it.

And what about today? If I have cancer, can my faith save me? If I pray enough and believe enough, can my loved one be spared the pain and agony of a long and excruciating death? And if I pray and my cancer spreads or my loved one keeps getting sicker, does that mean that my faith is somehow lacking, that I just don't have enough faith? It's tempting to think so. We see this correlation, some kind of correlation, between faith and healing in the New Testament, and we think that if we just have enough faith, then we can get better or our loved one might not have to die. I know. I've been there.

I've prayed at the bedside of a little boy who was dying of brain cancer and thought, "If I believe *enough* that healing is possible, then maybe Patrick will be spared." And more recently, I asked God to ease the suffering of my own father and I tried to believe with all my heart in order to make it happen. But things aren't the same today as they were in Jesus' time.

Many of the miracles that he performed and that his disciples performed after him, were possible because Jesus, the miracle worker, is the Christ, the Son of the living God! These signs and wonders validated His ministry and demonstrated the power of the spirit in the early church.

Does this mean that miracles no longer happen today? Certainly not! I believe that when someone falls gravely ill, we should always begin by praying for a miracle. But realize that God's intervention, or non-

intervention, does **not** depend on the measure of my faith. It depends solely on the providence of God. And remember too, that death is not the enemy, but is sometimes the welcome relief from pain and suffering for which we've been praying all along.

In today's passage, Jesus admonishes his followers to put their faith into action. We can do that by praying for the sick, first for healing and if healing doesn't come, then for the strength and comfort of God's presence.

We can put our faith into action by building a Habitat house, by serving a meal for the homeless, by donating money to the church, by teaching a Sunday school class, by sharing our faith with a neighbor, by treating others with love and respect. There are countless ways for us to put our faith to good purpose.

"If you had faith like a mustard seed"...Jesus wasn't calling into question whether or not his followers had faith. He knew they did. What Jesus cared about was what came next..."you would say to this Mulberry tree, be uprooted"... If you have faith, says Jesus, then *say* something, *do* something with your faith. James, one of Jesus followers, was there when Jesus said it, and he was one who got it right. Later on in his letters, James said "Faith without works is useless. Faith without works is dead."

I think that's the message that Jesus was trying to get across to his followers. And it's the message that he wants us to hear today. So go out from this sanctuary and put your faith into action: pray, feed the hungry, work on the side of the oppressed, practice hospitality, be kind, gracious, and loving in all of your relationships. And if you do, if you put your faith to work, it **will** increase. That little mustard seed of faith will blossom and grow into a tree, large enough for birds to come and nest in its branches. Put your faith to work and it **will** increase. And you won't even have to ask.