

Our Faith, Like God's Grace, Is Sufficient

Luke 17: 1 – 10

Romans 8: 31-38

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Every time you hear one of Jesus parables, ask two questions, “What’s Jesus really saying?” and then, “What’s Jesus not saying?”

As you know, some of Jesus’ parables leave us totally confused. Case in point: the parable of the dishonest steward we talked about last week. It seems Jesus condoned dishonesty, but take a second look. Jesus is actually advocating creativity. So the take away lesson is be as creative as possible in your discipleship as the dishonest steward was in his double dealing.

That’s why we need to ask the questions, “What is Jesus saying?” and “What is Jesus not saying in this parable?”

Today’s parable from Luke’s Gospel is in response to the disciples’ request to increase their faith. Apparently, the longer they stayed with Jesus the more they were overwhelmed by what would be required of them. Having been warned they had to deny themselves, pick up their crosses, they wanted a new and improved faith to carry out their callings.

That’s when Jesus assured them, “If you have 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.”

What’s Jesus not saying? Obviously, he’s not saying with enough faith you can magically send trees out to the middle of the ocean. He’s also not saying faith is something to be manufactured and improved, like the newest brand of laundry detergent that’s ten times better than the stuff you bought yesterday.

Thinking we can increase ourselves if we try hard enough comes from the lessons we were taught since childhood. We’ve been carefully, systematically told if we have the desire and want it badly enough, we can get better and better.

Yes, we can increase to some degree our God given talents and become better athletes, students and professionals. That being said, we still don’t have the power to increase the quality of our faith. Sufficient faith, like sufficient grace, only comes from the mystical transformation coming from above.

That’s what Jesus was trying to say when the disciples asked for an “increased” faith. But they were asking the wrong question. Instead of asking for a new, supersized faith, Jesus wanted them to be satisfied with the faith God already gave them.

“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed...”

Jesus lived in an agrarian culture. Most people were farmers or knew someone who was. Then knew something about those tiny mustard seeds barely visible to the naked eye.

Jesus' point? God already planted within them all the faith they needed. They didn't need increased faith. They could only live out their faith by trusting and obeying God's will. What's more, they had just enough faith to immediately go out to prepare people for the coming kingdom of God.

What's more, Jesus was telling them, "Don't be afraid, and don't be shy. Take what you have and change the world! But never forget only God changes the world, through you.

The other night I was watching the Star Wars movie, the Empire Strikes Back. Young Luke Skywalker was being mentored by Yoda a small creature, who encouraged Luke not to underestimate the power he was already given. Yoda commanded Luke to use the power of the force to lift his spaceship out of a swamp. Intimidated, Luke says, "Okay, I'll try." Yoda barked back, "No try not. Do or do not. There is no try."

After Luke's attempt fails he whines, "I can't do it, it's too large!"

Yoda retorts, "Size matters not! Look at me..."

Again Yoda again spoke of the power of the force permeating the cosmos. Luke tried and failed again, this time confessing, "I can't believe it," Yoda replied, "That's why you fail."

Jesus said, "If you have the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this Mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it obey you."

Even if you only have the tiniest speck of faith, when you make the decision to trust and obey God's will, you'll find yourself doing what God requires of you. That's all Jesus was saying.

We can also apply the templet, "What's Jesus saying?" and "What's Jesus not saying?" to the second parable about the master running his slaves into the ground. After working all day in the fields, they walk through the door only to hear the master ordering them to get his dinner ready. It seems like Jesus is saying its okay for slaves to be run ragged because after all, they're worthless.

But that's not what Jesus is saying. He would never advocate employers bullying their employees or squeezing the last drop blood out of them.

Jesus is saying our reward for being disciples comes from what we can get from giving God our all. How does that motivate us to offer up our lives to God? Only because we know Christ already gave his all for us on the cross. After experiencing his unconditional love, we are motivated to give ourselves back to God, by giving our all to our our neighbor in need.

Today we celebrate World Wide Communion Sunday. Christians all over the globe are gathering around our Lord's Table to celebrate the body and the blood of Christ given up for our salvation. Today our denomination is also calling our celebration "Bread for the World Sunday." As we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are commanded to remember Jesus and the least of his brothers and sisters.

This spiritual food God gives us nourishes our innermost being. Only Christ can feed the hungry soul. Only Christ can quench the deepest thirst. By obeying this hunger and thirst for God, the faith we have is confirmed on earth and reaffirmed in heaven.

That explains why the apostle Paul proclaimed with conviction, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Paul knew none of his great accomplishments in spreading the gospel was his own doing. Many times he was beaten-down and left bleeding on the roadside. Too often, he was viciously attacked by his adversaries. More than once he felt empty and used up. But he never quit. Not because he was a flawless human being. Time and again he openly confessed his weaknesses and shortcomings. Instead, he would claim he never quit only because of the power working within him.

In his letter to the Romans he wrote, "I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory about revealed to us... What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us who can be against us... it is Christ who died, yes, who was raised from the dead. Who intercedes for us? Who then can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-38)

Paul reaffirmed what Jesus said earlier. Our faith, our tiny, inconsistent faith is all we need to live and serve for Christ, because when we falter, the Holy Spirit kicks in and takes up the slack. All we need to do is trust and obey and go with the flow. And when adversaries try to stop us and circumstances beyond our control demoralize us, we still trust and obey God's will as we understand it.

Sooner than later, you and I will be put to the test. God will give us a task we think beyond our abilities, our resources and our strength. God only asks us to think again and remember Jesus' promise, "Be of good cheer, for I have already overcome the world."

If we hold fast and persevere to the end, you and I will experience the power of God living in us and through us for the greater good. That is reward enough for a life well lived.