

Mustard Seed Faith in Strange Places
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Psalm 137:1-6; Luke 17(3-4)5-10

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World Communion

To set the scene for Jesus' words about the mustard seed, and the curious teaching that follows, it is best to hear the two verses preceding our lesson in Luke 17. Jesus is teaching his disciples what to do if another believer sins against them. Using the Common English Bible translation for our lesson, here is what Jesus tells his disciples (Luke 17:3-4),

³ *Watch yourselves! If your brother or sister sins, warn them to stop. If they change their hearts and lives, forgive them.* ⁴ *Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person."*

Really? Seven times? Did Jesus say forgive someone seven times in a single day? I don't know about you, but once, twice maybe – three times would be a stretch. Seven times? I would find that hard to do. And in hearing how the disciples responded, they did as well. They make a three word request to Jesus, "Increase our faith." We continue our lesson.

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.*

At this point, I am thinking, "Jesus, say more about seeds and faith and watering and nurturing," for they are wonderful preaching images, but instead he moves on to this strange teaching about masters and servants. It is confusing to my twenty-first century ears. Yet, the example Jesus uses would be familiar to his first century listeners.

Jesus poses three questions about the master-servant relationship and wants his disciples to answer from the perspective of the master, possibly a small farmer with a single slave. The questions are rhetorical – the disciples do not answer, but they know the answers – but I am going to invite you to call out the answers. I am also going to give you the answers Jesus expected for the three questions: no, yes, no. Even as you answer as would a master in the first century, sense whether the given answer feels awkward, or even wrong. Again the answers are: no, yes, no. Jesus asked,

⁷ *"Would any of you say to your servant, who had just come in from the field after plowing or tending sheep, 'Come! Sit down for dinner'? **NO***

⁸ *Wouldn't you say instead, 'Fix my dinner. Put on the clothes of a table servant and wait on me while I eat and drink. After that, you can eat and drink'? **YES***

⁹ *You won't thank the servant because the servant did what you asked, will you? **NO***

Again, Jesus is asking them to answer in the practice of the well-established first century master-servant relationship. Suffice it to say, Jesus is not condoning slavery, but using the master-servant example to teach about faith. Still, I find the expected answers awkward, but then, in what I find to be an ingenious twist, Jesus turns the example around. While they were to answer his questions as the master, in the last verse of our lesson Jesus instructs his disciples to be like the servant:

¹⁰ *In the same way [as the servant], when you have done everything required of you, you should say, 'We servants deserve no special praise. We have only done our duty.'*"

Some stores and most banks have a trove of lollipops to offer children who accompany a parent or grandparent. When this happens, upon receiving the treat, you hope the child will say, _____. Right, "Thank you." If not, we usually offer the prompt, "What do you say?"

One of our first lessons in life is to say, "please" and "thank you." At a certain age, we ask children to write thank you notes for gifts. Those who have had a child graduate from school have likely asked, "Have you written your thank you notes, yet?," perhaps adding, "No, it is not okay to send them by email." Thank you's are what we are to do, what we ought to do, a duty.

We also expect or at least hope to be thanked for what we do. If we make a dinner for someone, or send money to a college or non-profit, or give canned goods to the food pantry, or volunteer our time in the church, we can feel hurt or offended if we don't receive some kind of thank you. That is why I find it hard to hear Jesus' words in this morning's Gospel lesson.

Jesus says when your servant comes in from working in the field, you don't tell them to sit down and have dinner, but you tell them to serve you dinner before they eat. And then, Jesus asks, "Do you thank your slave?" understanding the answer is, "No, of course you do not because they are just doing what servants ought to do." To me, this seems harsh, even very much out of character for Jesus. Perhaps he was just having a rough day. Even if someone is a servant, or even a slave, shouldn't one thank them? I tend to thank the wait staff in a restaurant any time they provide a service from presenting my salad, to removing an emptied plate, to filling the water glass, to bringing the check – well, maybe not always for bringing the check. I do so even though I am paying them to do it, and they are doing what they ought to do.

Now, as a side note, this passage can be used abusively. There are those who have read this passage and said, because Jesus did not condemn slavery, he must allow people to own other people. And for those who seek to work their servants to the point of death, one could find justification for doing so straight from the mouth of Jesus. But, It is heresy to attempt to justify slavery or abuse of workers with these words of Jesus, and goes against the full Gospel imperative of compassion and grace, justice and equality. The ethics of slavery, proper manners, and workers' rights are not Jesus' point in this passage.

So what is Jesus' point? We go back to the verses where Jesus told his disciples to forgive someone who is repentant, even seven times in a single day. We know elsewhere, he talks about seventy times seven, but even just seven is hard, and the disciples know it. So, they say to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" Increase our faith, so we can forgive as you have taught us. Increase our faith so forgiving becomes ingrained into who we are, our duty as your disciples.

Jesus reverses the master-servant example to help the disciples have the faith to forgive someone over and over. Again, he began by asking his listeners to identify with the masters, what masters expect of their servants. Quite simply, servants work hard and are not thanked for doing what they are supposed to do.

Jesus then turns the example around. With the phrase, "In the same way..." he says, "I don't want you to be the master, but to identify with the servant who works in the fields all day, and the kitchen all evening; the servant who is not thanked because he is just doing what he ought to do. 'So you also,...' – as my disciples, you should not expect rewards or thanks, for doing what disciples ought to do." ... *You should say, 'We servants deserve no special praise. We have only done our duty.'*"

Of course, just because Jesus said it, does not make it easy. It's hard to help others when you are not thanked. It's hard to put time and effort into the food pantry, and not be thanked by the recipients; harder still when people are demanding or even complain. It is almost impossible to forgive people who sin against you over and over again.

In our Psalm 137 reading, the people of Israel are in exile in Babylon. When they try to sing the Lord's song in this foreign land, they are mocked by their captors. If your God is so great how can we hold you captive in our land? Why doesn't your God come and free you? Singing God's song, obeying Jesus' teaching on forgiving, is hard when it goes against our culture, and our nature.

Jesus knew the work of faith would be hard for his disciples, particularly after his death. He knew their good deeds would not be recognized, they'd rarely be thanked, and they would face ridicule and be called fools. So, he speaks of a mustard seed of faith growing so we can withstand our frustrations and overcome our hesitations, and do the work we ought to be doing.

A key to our understanding is recognizing our faith is not really ours, but the work of the Spirit within us. We make space for the faith seed to be planted, but the Spirit nurtures it. We are called to live out the faith.

It is not our seed, but one God has planted. That is the miracle of the mustard seed – God will grow it within us. We don't grow mulberry trees, nor can we throw them into the sea, but God's faith in us can enable us to do some impossible things – like forgiving the unforgivable over and over; like turning the other cheek; like doing something good for others day after day and not being thanked for it.

When we live our lives knowing faith is a gift that does not belong to us, we also realize the actions of our faith are not ours either. We are not building up points for ourselves on some godly checklist. We are not acting to impress others. We are not even in charge of bringing others to faith. We are simply doing what we ought to be doing for the master of our faith. As Jesus suggests, we are to say, "We are only doing our duty," "what we ought to do as disciples."

Of course, the words “ought” and “duty” invite differences. Our culture, our friends, our society all have opinions about what we “ought” to do, and who we “ought” to be, our duties as a worker, family member, or friend. Yet, we have a different standard.

Jesus was speaking to his disciples individually, but also collectively as the church. He was encouraging them to remind each other it is his teaching they “ought” to be doing, not the culture’s. He tells them it is his forgiving they “ought” to be doing, without the limits we consider socially reasonable. Jesus is the one who determines what his disciples “ought to be doing.”

In a sense, we know the cries of the Israelites in Babylon, that it is hard to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land, to be Christ’s people in strange places. When we are the church, we gift each other with such reminders, strengthening one another to do things contrary to cultural norm, and we encourage each other to sing the Lord’s song, and be Christ’s people in strange places.

So, when people notice we will not join in on gossip about another person, or when we speak of reconciliation rather than retaliation, we are saying, “I was not created in God’s image to talk about others behind their backs. I’m just doing what I ought to be doing as a servant of Christ.”

When the world clambers for revenge and we speak of turning the other cheek and praying for enemies, we are saying, “Seeking peace is what I have been created to do. I’m just doing what I ought to be doing as a servant of Christ.”

When people question how we can forgive someone over and over again, we are saying, “If it were up to me, I wouldn’t forgive them, but forgiving is what I was created to do. I’m just doing what I ought to be doing as a servant of Christ.”

It’s a good phrase to live by. It may look crazy to the world, but when the going is rough or the places seem strange, we can say, “I’m just doing what I ought to be doing as a servant of Christ.”