

GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Sunday Sermon, October 3, 2004

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 22c

Reading: Luke 17:5-10

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.”

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’? ⁸ Would 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’? ⁹ Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰ So 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!’

“Expect Great Things from God”

I want to begin with a story that has motions. I am aware that it is easy to remember the story and forget the point. However, we will come to the point again and I want you to remember it so we can repeat it aloud together at the end of this sermon.

The story begins when a police officer comes upon the scene of a one-car accident. The car is wrapped around a tree; and all the people inside the car are unconscious. After the police officer calls 911, the officer begins to investigate and discovers that there is a monkey in the car. With nothing else to do until more help arrives, the officer decides to interview the monkey to discover what happened.

The officer asks the monkey, “Do you know what happened here?”

(Nod “yes” - as the monkey.) “Can you tell me what this man was doing? (hand gesture indicating drinking) “What was the woman doing? (hand gesture indicating talking) “And what were the kids doing in the

back seat? (hand gesture indicating fighting). I'm beginning to get the picture. "Oh, one more thing. What were you doing?" (hand gesture indicating driving). Now that's the story...let's make sure we get the point. It is this, "Don't monkey around." Remember that.

In the Gospel reading, the disciples expect great things from God so they cry out, "Increase our faith!" - but we do not know why they are asking Jesus to do so. Did the disciples have doubts about who Jesus was? Did they want supernatural powers to counter the dominating power of the religious and political leaders? Did they merely want to be faithful servants with enough faith to believe that God could and would work through them?

When we open our Bibles, we discover the reason was simpler than we might expect but also much harder. Jesus had just asked the disciples to do something which they knew in their hearts that they could not do.

"If a person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." That's what Jesus had just told them. No wonder the disciples were crying for an increase in their faith. Perhaps they could forgive seven times in a lifetime, but seven times a day? They really needed great things from God to bring about something like this. The disciples are more like us than they realize. They are willing to do what is reasonable to follow Jesus. They had left behind many things to follow Jesus but now Jesus begins to talk about impossible tasks that they are sure they cannot accomplish.

The problem we have with forgiving is that we connect it to trust. We want to have faith in people, especially people who have wronged us. We want to trust and believe that they will not wrong us again. Forgiving is easy the first time. The second time, we think, well, perhaps now they have learned their lesson. Forgiveness gets a harder the third time and by the fourth time we know there is no way that the person will turn around in an attempt to stop doing what is wrong. We

no longer trust them and we do not believe that our forgiveness will make one bit of difference in their life nor in ours. In asking Jesus to increase their faith, the disciples want to be transformed, but they really don't think they can be changed. They see the world as it is and they cannot imagine the world as God wants it to be. They have trouble seeing people who have wronged them as brothers and sisters.

We are one month away from the election and we know which states are blue and which states are red. We know that Ohio is the most important state in this election. Political experts tell us that our nation is divided along ideological grounds. So deep is the division that folks dare not talk about politics without first being sure which side people are on. You can drive through neighborhood after neighborhood and see signage that promote one ticket while the person across the street or next door displays signage promoting the other ticket.

I heard two stories concerning this great divide. A friend asked his friend who was an ardent Republican, "How do you get along with your friends who are Democrats?" and she said, "Simple. I don't have any friends who are Democrats." Likewise, two couples were invited to the home of a Lutheran pastor. During dinner, as they were discussing the election, the pastor made this statement, "I find it impossible to believe that anyone who is a registered Democrat could be a Christian." I think that statement speaks for itself.

We think the world is blue or red and we cannot imagine that there is any identity deeper than that. Our world so easily gives us labels and we are much too eager to accept them. Once we label someone with an identity, it is hard to believe anything else about him or her. Yet Jesus says if a person repents seven times in one day, seven times we are to re-see them as a child of God. Jesus calls us to look again at the person who has wronged us and see them as God sees them. Forgiveness is not about whitewashing the past; it is about seeing the present in a new light. Forgiveness insists that people are not red or blue. Instead, they belong to the one flock with Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior.

No wonder the disciples cried, “Increase our faith!” Jesus is calling for the disciples to see the world in new way. Since the disciples do not know how to do this, Jesus gives them an answer, but it is not the answer they expect. Jesus says, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and plated in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” The disciples want a diagram for getting from point A to point B, but they do not get one. Faith is not a game plan for solving problems and resolving conflicts, nor is faith understanding why things are the way they are. Ultimately, faith is not about answers or capacity. Faith is beyond measurement. Either you have it or you don’t. Our Gospel reading says that having faith is like being a slave who simply does what is commanded, who knows his or her place and does what needs being done.

By The Grace of God in Christ Jesus, we all have faith. Faith is about a relationship - a relationship with Jesus Christ and about the love of God through Christ Jesus. This is what we celebrate again today through Word and Sacrament for Service. Faith is being grasped by Jesus Christ so that you know in your heart and in your bones that your life and his life in this world are mixed together. You need not fear, no matter what happens on November 2nd or any other day because once faith is grasped, you see your neighbor and this world in a completely new way. Once faith is caught, you can forgive because you are a new creation, and you see everyone else as a new creation as well.

Our second reading says, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois, and in your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” Faith is no mere hand-me-down, but a “gift of God that is within you” and a good treasure entrusted to you with the help of the Holy Spirit. Faith is a gift from God that comes wrapped in what is human, including our family and our traditions.

When we think about how we can change the world, we always despair. However, remember, it’s not about us as much as it is about God working in and through us. The truth is, it doesn’t take much, a

word, a touch, a call, a gesture and faith is shared. It only takes faith the size of a mustard seed for God to transform the world.

Our Head to Heart team and students are studying Martin Luther this month. We will have a Luther celebration for the entire congregation on Reformation Day, October 31st. The key Biblical verse that brought about the reformation of the entire Western Christian Church was one little verse that Martin Luther discovered in the book of Habakkuk. Habakkuk 2:4b “The righteous shall live by faith.”

When it comes to living out our faith, we, like the disciples, expect great things from God. Increase our faith Lord, so that we do not sit back and complain about the conflicts of the world, as Habakkuk once did not trust that people will never change and the world can never be, as God wants it to be, as the disciples did in our Gospel reading. In Christian faith and in the Christian life, Jesus calls us to take stock of who we are and, more importantly, who Christ is. As you move forward starting with point key point that comes from that funny story from which we began.

Do you remember the point? It applies to our life and our faith in Christ Jesus. Let’s say it aloud together. Don’t monkey around! Again, Don’t monkey around! Don’t monkey around. Be faithful to your calling and faithful to your Lord. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Pastor Thomas D. Prochaska
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
901 E. Stroop Road
Kettering, Ohio 45459-4688