

Faith, Forgiveness, and Food

[Text – Luke 17:1-10]

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Have you ever been faced with an extremely difficult situation or a life-challenging crisis and thought to yourself, "If I only had more faith!"? That's the dilemma Jesus' followers face in today's New Testament reading. Jesus is explaining to them the precarious line we walk, between rebuking someone who has wronged us, and forgiving that person when he or she repents. He indicates that there's a corresponding connection between our willingness to forgive, and the danger of causing "one of these little ones to stumble." In other words, our desire to hold others accountable for the wrongs they do, must be balanced with a graciousness that can still recognize that wrongdoer as a potentially pure child of God. Talk about a tough challenge! It might seem easier to snap your fingers and uproot a mulberry tree, or as Matthew's Gospel puts it, "say to a mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea!'" Yet Jesus says that if you or I have *faith* the size of a mustard seed, we could do remarkable things such as these. We would even have the power to forgive those who have wronged us, *every* time they repent. Now *that* would be quite miraculous!

This week, as I explored with this text, I kept returning to one basic question: "How much faith is *enough*?" And I realized that the faith to which Jesus refers isn't something that is measured by quantity, but rather by quality. So maybe it's not so much a matter of needing *more* faith, as it is about what we do with the faith we have. Or more specifically, where it is that you and I ultimately *put* our faith. The fundamental problem with the disciples' request to 'increase their faith' - as well as our own similar requests - is that they [or we] are looking at *faith* as some kind of commodity that can be poured-out and measured. It's as though one ounce of faith might be enough to cure the common cold, while it would take a ton of faith to cure the Cleveland sports teams' championship drought. [Talk about moving mountains!] Yet Jesus contends that when it comes to *faith*, size really doesn't matter. In fact, he takes the smallest living thing he can think of – a tiny mustard seed – and says, 'This is really all the faith you will ever need!'

In Life's truly tough times, when you and I face mountains of trouble, or deeply embedded problems that we would love to see uprooted and thrown into the sea, we may find ourselves echoing the disciples plea to "increase our faith!" Those are the times when it's extremely important to remember Jesus' example of the mustard seed. That seed may be minuscule, but it contains the potential for life and maturation and remarkable growth; and so does your faith, regardless of how small it may seem to be. The essential thing to consider, is where you and I *put* our faith, so that it can live and grow and thrive. Do we place our faith in our own ability to handle Life's problems and pains, or do we dare to trust that we can rely on the Holy Source of Life to ultimately

keep us safe and secure? Do we automatically conclude that there are some injustices too horrible to ever overcome; or do we consider the possibility, that with Divine Grace, forgiveness and healing might actually be obtainable?

When it comes to forgiving those who have grievously hurt us, or those we see as our bitter enemies, our only hope for reconciliation and healing must come from a Source greater than ourselves. Profound evil can only be overcome by a more Profound Good. And isn't that the general definition of *God* - the Ultimate, Connecting Source of all that is good and loving and gracious? Jesus suggests that when a person takes even the tiniest step toward trusting in that Divine Goodness and Grace, it creates a dramatic shift in that person's life and world view.

When you and I decide to let God be God, we begin to realize that the Holy One who completely loves, forgives, and accepts *us*, can also freely love, forgive, and accept *others*. And if someone for whom we deeply care is seriously ill or in dire straits, we can trust that our tremendous concern for them is but a drop in that vast Ocean of Compassion from whence all Life and Love originates. Therefore we can pray for them, we can stand beside them, and we can truly believe that their lives and well-being are in God's loving and capable hands. We can trust that the never-ending care of the Holy One *will* sustain them – regardless of what transpires. With even the smallest amount of faith in the vastness of Divine Compassion, you and I come to recognize that though our connection to our loved ones is strong, God's eternal love for them is stronger still; and that the decisive, Divine response to suffering, brokenness and loss, is redemptive healing, renewal and Life.

It was that belief which allowed Jesus to willingly lay-down his life for the sake of others. It was that hope which empowered him to freely forgive those who nailed him to the cross. And it is that New Life of the Resurrection that summons you and me to also trust, and forgive, and to give-up our lives for the sake of others. When we do this, it can remove from our own necks, those millstones of bitterness, hatred, or fear that would otherwise threaten to drown us.

For Jesus, faith in God and forgiveness of others go hand-in-hand, because when you truly trust that the Creative Source of the Cosmos is good and loving, kind and just, the need to bring about retribution fades away. This doesn't mean that we idly sit back and allow evil to run rampant. In fact, Jesus says we *should* rebuke those who do wrong – not to disdainfully assail their depravity, but to steadfastly help them face the error of their ways, so that hopefully they will repent. And when they *do* repent, you and I are called to welcome them with forgiving hearts and open arms.

One of the tangible signs our Faith, and of our own forgiveness, is the *food* of Holy Communion. It's a physical reminder that you and I are spiritually fed and nourished, so that we might live and love as Jesus did. Like the Divine gifts of faith and forgiveness, this Life-sustaining food is also available to all. And as with faith and forgiveness, a little bit of this food goes a long way! Jesus faithfully affirms that our sharing of Holy Communion not only connects us to our Eternal Source, but to the vast Human

Community throughout the entire world. And my own faith in Christ's compassion confirms that this tiny yet potent meal is to be freely offered to anyone who desires it.

"But Pastor, what if I'm not a church member, or not sure where my faith lies, or what this meal really means?" Well then I say, join the club! I'm sure that Jesus' own disciples were extremely bewildered to be offered Christ's body and blood by the still-living Jesus. That definitely wasn't kosher, nor even comprehensible; yet they took and ate and drank, because their friend Jesus invited them to do so. After all, *faith* isn't a matter of fully understanding things - often it's a matter of taking action on things that we *don't* fully understand. And this Gift of Communion is graciously offered to us all, in order to inspire and increase our faith. It is the food of God, for the people of God; therefore let us joyfully share it together today, as One truly Faithful and Forgiveness Family!