

Sermon Luke 17: 5-10 October 2, 2016
October Sermon Series "Learn from the Master"

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 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.

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'? 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'? You won't thank the servant because the servant did what you asked, will you? In the same way, when you have done everything required of you, you should say, 'We servants deserve no special praise. We have only done our duty.'

October's Verse for the Soul: Matthew 11:28-30

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

I'm just going to say it: there are parts of the bible that are kind of repulsive to us as postmodern readers. I think a major reason people don't read the bible is because we might come upon something that squashes the appealing idea of a friendly, grandfatherly God who always loves us, no matter what, and also that what God desires most is to make us happy. So if we do come upon something difficult or offensive in scripture what are we to do? Throw out the whole bible? Keep only the parts that make us feel good? For some of us, the racist, sexist, homophobic, and violent passages in the bible are a deal-breaker, and we quit reading... and we decide to appreciate the bible the way we appreciate kale. By all reports it's good for you but it's just too unpalatable to gag down.

I have another suggestion (instead of closing the book) when we read something troubling or offensive in scripture, and that's to *keep* reading....to read what came before (in a particular passage) and what came after, and when it was written, and to whom,

and why. And after all of that, if there's no satisfactory answer, then I suggest a personal inventory of your experience of God. Do you know God to be a God of love, and mercy, and kindness? What does the bible as a whole tell us about the nature of God? I'll give you a "Reader's Digest" version of what the bible tells me about God: God loves all of us, always. Regardless of how we feel or how we act, God loves us. God is love. God created us out of the dust of the earth and in God's own image, so we have the potential to act like dirt or to reflect God's light. God created us to be in relationship with God, and with others... with all others. God has impossibly high standards for those of us who call ourselves God's people: God expects us to love as God loves us; to forgive as God forgives us; and to serve those in need. Now we can't possibly measure up to God's standards, and are continually disappointing God, but God forgives us, loves us, and works in and through us, and is heaven-bend on perfecting us. We are (as my spiritual director likes to say) God's favorite project.

The disciples said to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" And Jesus said, "If you had faith even the size of a mustard seed..." and it sounds as if Jesus is berating the disciples (and us) for a lack of faith. Tragically these words are used against faithful people: "If only you have enough faith (people are told, sometimes from the pulpit, sometimes from the television evangelist, sometimes from other believers) your child... your marriage... your finances.... your health... could make a tree move into the sea. If only you had enough faith."

Right after Jesus said, "If only you had faith even the size of a mustard seed" He told the disciples a story... which is sometimes called the Parable of the Worthless Slave. This is one of those hard places in the bible where it's tempting to walk away.

But let's keep looking. What were Jesus and the disciples talking about when they said to Him, "Increase our faith"?

Jesus had been teaching about the demands of discipleship, and the Pharisees who were listening to Him, Luke tells us, sneered at Him. So Jesus told them a parable about two men who died, one a rich man and one a poor man, and about the rewards they each received in the afterlife. (This is one of the stories delightfully recreated in the 1970's movie, "Godspell.") The parable Jesus told about the rich man and the poor man is about how risky it is (now and later) to mistreat someone suffering or ignore the needs of the poor. In that story Jesus showed God's tender compassion for the poor, with a reminder that the measure we use to judge others will be used to measure us.

Luke then moves us from Jesus and the Pharisees to just Jesus and the disciples. This is from Eugene Peterson's "The Message" translation. "Jesus said to His disciples, 'Hard trials and temptations are bound to come, but too bad for whoever brings them on! Better to wear a millstone necklace and take a swim in the deep blue sea than give [one of My children] a hard time! Be alert. If you see your friend going wrong, correct him. If she responds, forgive her. Even if it's personal against you and repeated seven times through the day, and seven times the person says, 'I'm sorry, I won't do it again,' forgive them.'"

Forgive someone who's been mean, rude, thoughtless, or awful to you... forgive them again and again? Time after time? Really Jesus? No wonder the disciples said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" Because on our own... how is this possible? Are we back to the theology of kale: *you* should eat it because it's good for *you*, but I can't gag it down?

I think when He sat alone with the disciples Jesus looked at them with such love and tenderness. He really knew these men and there were women too... He lived with them, ate with them, listened to them, taught them... He knew their faults and fears and woundedness (as He knows ours) and He loved them without reservation and unconditionally (the way He loves us.) I imagine that the disciples all sat down with Jesus, their eyes fixed on Him, as they listened and tried to unpack another dense, layered story the Master told. Jesus told them about a slave (and although slavery is a repugnant and unchristian practice to us, it was an accepted part of the ancient world. And even though Jesus spoke matter-of-factly about slavery, seeming to take it for granted, it was the Church who worked to end slavery. It would be Jesus' followers who saw and named the ungodliness of one person owning another.)

Jesus told this story (this is from the New International Version) "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'? 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'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 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!'"

This parable Jesus told and today's scripture is about forgiveness. It's about having enough faith in God (Jesus said even faith the size of a mustard seed is sufficient) to offer forgiveness again and again, time after time, just as God forgives us, again and again, time after time. And when we practice forgiveness we are only doing what is expected of us, and we don't need to look for approval or admiration or thanks.

Because we are servants of the Master, Jesus, and we are only doing what He has commanded... we are only offering to others what Jesus has already given to us, in abundance, and more than our hearts can hold: Mercy. Kindness. Forgiveness.

The disciples recognized what we recognize: that we can't do this on our own. We need enough faith to believe that when we practice forgiveness, God is pleased, and that others will see God's light shine in us, even in dark places, even in dark relationships.

This month I'm preaching a sermon series called "Learn from the Master." Advent really is just right around the corner, and before it gets here and we start to feel sentimental about the Baby Jesus, let's spend some time with the Master Jesus. Let's learn from Him, grow strong in Him, and change the world (here in Lamorinda and in Walnut Creek and Pleasant Hill and Clayton) let's change the world by the ways we love and forgive and serve. And then let's watch for love and mercy to ripple out into the world. Let's never be satisfied again with untried Christianity. Let's be "holy" [h-o-l-y] dissatisfied with anything less than learning from and walking with the Master, Jesus.

Today is World Communion Sunday, which was started in 1933 by a Presbyterian pastor who wanted to bring churches together, to increase ecumenical unity, and to set aside a Sunday to remember that Christians all around the globe eat this bread, drink this cup, and serve this Master, Jesus. And how He is known in the world is through us... through our love, through our forgiveness, through our service.

This month we have a verse to learn, to say over and over until it seeps down into our bones. You'll find it on page 3 of the bulletin, a third of the way down the page.

Jesus said these words, and they are meant for us as we walk with Him, and learn from Him, as do what He expects of us, and as we serve Him by serving others.

Let's read it together, starting with the words, "Jesus said." [Jesus said] "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Thank You, Jesus! Amen.