

Year C, October 6, 2019
17 Pentecost (Proper 22)
Christ Church, Mexia

“A little boy was afraid of the dark (like many young people). One night his mother told him to go out on the back porch and bring her the broom. The little boy turned to his mother and said, ‘Mamma, I don’t want to go out there. It’s dark.’ The mother smiled reassuringly at her son. ‘You don’t have to be afraid of the dark,’ she explained. ‘Jesus is out there. He’ll look after you and protect you.’ The little boy looked at his mother real hard and said, ‘Are you sure he’s out there?’ ‘Yes, I’m sure. He is everywhere, and he is always ready to help you when you need him,’ she said. The little boy thought about that for a minute, then went to the back door and cracked it a little. Peering out into the darkness, he called, ‘Jesus? If you’re there, would you please hand me that broom?’” (Hodgin, 413)

Faith would seem to be the topic suggested by the gospel reading today. “Increase our faith!” the disciples exclaim. They say this in response to his explanation of their duties as disciples and their need to forgive that appears in the verses just before the reading today begins. In them, Jesus explains that discipleship is more demanding than they can imagine; that they are accountable to one another; and if they are wronged, they must forgive – over and over again if necessary.

Now here is where we can have difficulty with scripture. It is written, and even if it was an accurate, exact quotation of the words that Jesus used, which it most likely isn’t – but that’s a subject for another day, we have no idea about the tone Jesus may have used or his body language – his intent for the message. What was he trying to convey? Most often, I believe, we think from his words in today’s lesson that he is scolding his disciples – the tone with which I read it just a few moments ago. However, let’s think for a moment about another possibility – Jesus is teaching and he loves his disciples; let’s explore that possible tone.

In this loving, teaching context, Jesus changes the emphasis. It’s not about the quantity of faith. You only need this much to do remarkable things which you have.

Then also the seemingly disparate story about whether or not they would invite their slaves to eat with them and even thank them for what they’ve done begins to make more sense, to relate better to what he is saying about faith, and more importantly about how they should live. It’s not about “how much faith is enough,” but rather “what is faith for?” You have the faith you need; now live it! That seems to me to be his message.

In his example of master and slave, he poses questions to them based on 1st-century life which has an obvious answer – No. The master expects the servant

to perform his/her duties, and the servants, in turn, expect to receive nourishment, rest, protection and other benefits provided by the master. As the Rev. Kimberly Long says: "To understand faith in this way, then, is to understand it as a way of life. Those who serve God do so with a sense of duty and delight, living a life according to God's commandments. ... We serve God and one another, not for the bonus points, and not only because God expects it, but because we know that God has shown us the way to abundant life." Do you get thanked every time you wash the dishes, or walk the dog, or take out the trash, or do the gardening? So, in doing God's will, the disciples just do, we just do what we need to do, are expected to do? And this is a different way of conceptualizing faith.

It is about how we live together in community – both here and out there. According to Rev. Long: "This view of faith saves (us) the church from all sorts of missteps. In this divine economy, faith is less about personal fortitude and more about mutual forbearance, as we keep learning that we are all in this together. A community that lives out this sort of faith is not afraid to ask questions or express doubts or show weakness; nor is it afraid to value mercy over fairness, or to forgive one another's failings even when patience wears thin.

In this economy, faith is not stockpiled in a storehouse for the working of spiritual wonders, but it is lived out as obedience to a just and loving God. Trusting in God, we can let go of any illusions of self-reliance or control, while acknowledging that our faith cannot be measured, but only enacted." This is the difference between community and tribalism. In community there is connection based upon mutual affection and common humanity and sharing, but in tribalism, what David Brooks calls "the dark twin of community," there is hatred of the other, the common foe; where the emphasis is on erecting boundaries, exclusion and a warrior mentality based upon the view of scarcity.

As Christians we are all called to be disciples (Paul says often that he is a slave of Christ - nothing wrong with that). We are called to live in community. And when we learn to give love away, to put others first, even those who come after us, then we will get it all back. We do this because of what was written in a book a long time ago (hold up a Bible) and we only have to believe this much (pinch thumb and forefinger in a small gesture) in order to do it.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.

Amen