

**Proper 22 – 19 Pentecost – Year C – October 6, 2010 - Homily**  
**Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1: 1-14; Luke 17:5-10**  
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I found this neat quote from Abraham Maslow that seems so appropriate to this evening's reading from Luke's Gospel. "The great lesson is that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's backyard." We have mustard seeds, trees, the sea, apostles, farmers, and workers all in this short passage. Our work this evening is to find the sacred in these ordinary things and these ordinary people. There is a certain comfort in Jesus' words to the apostles, when He tells them that just a tiny bit of faith is more than enough to uproot trees or in the case of Matthew's Gospel, move mountains. Therefore, it's tempting to dwell on the story of the mustard seed to the exclusion of the rest of the reading, especially the bit about worthless slaves! But the two stories are linked, as we shall see.

The story open with the apostles boldly ask Jesus to "Increase our faith!" In the passage immediately prior to this one, the disciples have been talking with Jesus about two things, one is the importance of avoiding improper teaching of the good news to the point where one might lead another astray; the other is about the need to forgive others. That immediately gives us some perspective on the request to increase our faith. So often, we feel as if we lack knowledge or wisdom that would make sharing our faith easier. With the kind of dire warnings Jesus offers concerning mis-teaching, no wonder we are nervous! It's also true for many of us that we all struggle with forgiveness in one way or another. The kind of wounds we have sustained through our lives can be very deep. Wounds can become infected with anger, fear or downright hatred, and may require a good deal of time and attention to heal. According to Jesus, if others offer genuine repentance it should be enough for us to offer forgiveness. On the other hand, we may be holding out for something else to happen: some kind of recompense, some kind of retribution, maybe some sign that God is on our side before we feel that our forgiveness has been earned. What is remarkable here is that the apostles immediately recognize the link between God's gift of faith and the wisdom to share the Good News faithfully; as well as the link between God's gift of faith, and their capacity for forgiveness.

What the Gospel reading shows us is that faith is not a possession, but a disposition; more than just an attitude to life, it is a way of life. Faith leads to faithful behavior, which for a Christian includes a life transformed by the Holy Spirit into Christ-likeness. For a first century Jewish convert this would have made complete sense, because there was no separation between life and faith, or spirituality. There were no handy compartments for who we are at work, or who we are at home with our family, or who we are at the Temple or the synagogue on Saturday. Their spirituality was integral to their whole life, and way of being. The world has changed a lot; culture has shifted and molded us into fearful individuals. Our lives and way of being have become much more fragmented. In order to function in a highly secular world, we have created ways to compartmentalize different aspects of ourselves. For example, those who can't speak freely about their Christian faith at work by law have to find other ways to maintain their integrity. However, it's not impossible, because, as the Scripture says, "for God, all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Our tiny speck of faith is enough, simply because the One in whom we have put our faith is the creator of the universe. Ultimately, all the laws of humankind fall under God's laws, and are subject to God's will.

This part of the Gospel reading makes us think though about our own motivations. When the apostles uttered their request, they did so from a very different worldview, which actually amounted

to asking Jesus to help them become more faithful disciples. They knew that faith was God's gracious gift external to their natural way of being. Hence, to increase their faith would mean to accelerate God's gracious transformation of their lives to align more and more with God's will. For us, increasing our faith is to be transformed by and through Jesus' teaching and way of life modeled in His earthly ministry. Given today's cultural indoctrination, for us it may be less about a corporate or community-spirited "increase *our* faith", and more a reflection of our personal wants and needs along the lines of "increase *my* faith". It is also quite possible that our motivation is more akin to a desire for increased power and control, rather than a desire for greater Christ-likeness, including humility, and a greater desire to love and serve others. I'd love to be wrong about that, so feel free to disagree!

How then does this all link up with the next part of the reading about the worthless slave? We have to remember that this is Jesus speaking to his disciples telling a story that makes a point. Knowing what we know about Jesus, the story is almost certainly going to challenge our common cultural thought patterns and embedded ways of being. The other thing we need to remember is that the story is told in a society where the master/servant relationship was common. Everyone who heard the story would answer Jesus' question with a resounding "No". There was neither obligation nor expectation that the master would reward a servant for doing what they were supposed to do. The relationship described in the story is a far cry from the patron/client relationship, where a debt of honor may be incurred for an invitation to dinner, or some other service. Bearing in mind the whole system of patronage, the comment about being worthless slaves has a new interpretation. The word "worthless" now carries the meaning of debt free service, or those to whom no favor is due or owed as an obligation. As we can see, Jesus' story is simply another way of expressing faith as a gift from God – not an obligation or a reward – but contrary to culture, faith is a gift freely given to enable and empower us in our lives of joyful service.

In Christian terminology, what Jesus is talking about is the gift of God's grace. God gives us the gift of faith, in order that we might live faithfully. We don't need more than a mustard seed size faith to love and serve the Lord. Why? Because the equation for faithful living is completely tipped in favor of God's grace, versus our self-reliance and independence. Living faithfully is about how much we rely on God in Christ Jesus for our daily bread and moment-by-moment strength. Living faithfully is about how we lose ourselves for Christ's sake, and set aside our desires in favor of listening to the guidance of the Holy Spirit who teaches us, and transform us, according to God's will. Obedience to God will never be a way for us to gain some kind of extra credit in God's sight. Instead, as disciples of Jesus, our desire to obey God's will is sheer joy and pleasure. It is what the Psalmist calls, our humble sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God in deep gratitude for all that God has done for us. The true miracle of our lives is not our personal strength, power, or any kind of perceived goodness, but that Christ died for our sins. Through Jesus' resurrection and by God's grace, we are blessed with the gift of salvation and eternal life. Maslow was right. As Christians, living faithfully is living with such integrity that the sacred is reflected in our ordinary everyday lives. Our faith blesses us with new vision, and transforms everything we do to the glory of God's name.

Amen.