

October 6, 2019 Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
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GOSPEL

Luke 17:5-10

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the seventeenth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶The 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’? ⁸Would 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’?

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

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

As we continue to walk with the disciples in Luke’s gospel,
we are given more difficult teachings to digest today...

hard words to appreciate...

about faith and how little of it we seem to have...

and about the rewards we can apparently expect

for doing the work of following Jesus...

and how there aren’t any.

And the surrounding landscape of the scripture we receive today
is also fairly bleak.

The writer of Lamentations looks to Jerusalem...

from which her beloved children have been torn and taken into exile...

The grief is so great, that not only people, but the city herself...
and her empty roads and gates...
all weep and cry out.

Sometimes, we look at the landscape of our lives
and all we can see is the devastation.

Perhaps the church needs to sit longer with the depth of Scripture's grief...
to give us time to grieve, too.

When the day comes...

(or maybe it is today...or it is a day that has already come)...

when all you can do is weep or sit in aching silence...

and all you can see is destruction...

and all you can feel is pain...

you can open your Bible to Lamentations...

and you can be exactly where you are.

I think we want to move through grief sometimes...

but when we are most burdened by it...we can't just keep going...

We have to sit and rest in our grief.

And maybe those of us whose grief is lighter...

or whose ability to push it aside is somehow greater...

we might have enough energy to push through...

but if we do we might leave behind the very ones

who most need our companionship.

And I'm not sure pushing through really helps us, either.

Sometimes we have to settle in the land of grief for a time, too.

Being children of God does not make us magically immune from hard things...
no matter what the prosperity preachers tell you.

We do not have a "get out of life without suffering" card.

And there is not an amount of faith that if you reach it
you can level up to a world free from worry or pain.

And conversely...if you are suffering now...

it is not because you didn't believe hard enough
to earn your way out of suffering.

And while the disciples in Luke aren't going through a valley of grief as deep as the time of the exile...

they are having their own reckoning with the realities of life as followers of Jesus.

They are learning this lesson in their own way.

Last week we heard the gospel from a few chapters earlier in Luke...

how the disciples who were first sent out to share the good news came back to report what had happened...

and...in keeping with human nature

from basically...the beginning of time...

they were drunk on power.

They had been able to heal and preach and cast out demons.

They were amazed.

They felt powerful.

And they *loved* it.

It seems that so much of the work Jesus has to do with us after bringing us close to him...

and making us a part of his work...

is constantly reminding us what power is really for.

When we come close to power...

humans have this impulse to try to hold it and wield it and own it.

We want to possess power.

We want to stand on it...over and above others...

and be king of the mountain.

But Jesus knows that power is a tool of the kingdom

that can quickly transform into a force that works against God...

and it can take us with it.

Jesus knows that when we try to possess power...it ends up possessing us.

When the disciples came back last week

enamored with the power they had...

Jesus reminded them that the power isn't the point.
The point is that we belong to God.
That we get to tell other people they belong to God.
We get to speak God's claim on their lives
and banish the other powers that want to claim them.
Our names are written in heaven. *That* is the point.

And now, today...in the verses just before the ones we read...
Jesus has just finished teaching the disciples about forgiveness...
and how deep and long the work of forgiveness can be.
And their response seems to be:
"That sounds really hard.
Could you just give us some more of that faith stuff...
that power...that magic...to make it easier?
Can you just do it for us, Jesus?"

And Jesus redirects them...and us...
saying that it isn't about how much faith you have.
That, also, is not the point.

If you have any faith at all you can already do amazing things.
You can uproot trees and send them flying to ocean.

If they'd been standing near a beehive...he just as likely might have said,
"You could tell these bees to follow you
and you could wear their hive as a hat."

Then he talks about rewards...or more specifically...the lack of them.
He talks about how the life he is calling us into
doesn't put us above anyone...
just like that power they felt in those first days
didn't make them better than anyone else.

We don't get a special prize for doing these things...even though they are hard.

As soon as we start looking down at anyone,
Jesus is going to point out the M.C. Escher drawing
that is the kin-dom of God and say...

“Up and down and high is low...

Don't bother trying to get above anyone here.

It doesn't work like that.”

There are no moral desserts...gold stars...or cookies
for doing what we have been called to do...it turns out.
And today...perhaps we can just sit in the hard truth of that.
Because it is hard.

It is hard to be a co-worker in the kingdom of God.

It is hard to do what is right. It is hard to forgive.

It is hard to believe.

It is hard...

We're going to be talking with the Missional River Listening Team
at lunch today
(and next week between services if you can't make it to lunch)
about some of the work we may be called into next here in this place.

And it is exciting...

maybe as exciting as being sent out among the seventy
with the power to heal and forgive and cast out evil.

And it is also going to be hard...

hard enough that we will want Jesus to give us more power than we have
to make it easier.

Hard enough that we will have to learn more and more
how to listen to each other and our neighbors.

Hard enough that we will have to be humble and ask forgiveness
and forgive each other when we miss the mark or hurt each other.

Because it turns out, there's no magic power we can get, to make it easy...
no higher status we get to earn so we know we're better
than some of those other people who don't do the work we do.

All we get...

is the assurance that our names are written in heaven...

the promise that God never abandons us -

even the deepest valley of desolation and lament...

All we get is adoption into the household of the Author and Creator of Life.

All we get is the knowledge that we don't have to earn our place here

by having enough faith to uproot trees and tame bees...

even though that would hardly take any faith at all.

All we get is an invitation to the banquet of life.

All we get is love that stretches beyond the bounds of time and space.

All we get is...everything we need...and more.

Thanks to be God.

Amen.