

“Miracle-workers”

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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

17th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22C) – 5 & 6 October 2019

This week, I spent a few days listening to the teaching and preaching of the reverend Doctor Emilie Townes, a Christian ethicist who specializes in theology and the black woman’s experience in the American church. She came to speak at the University of the South in Sewanee, a school whose historic buildings were built by enslaved people, whose monuments are dedicated to slave-owners and confederate soldiers and bishops who wrote that slavery was supported by the Biblical witness. Dr. Townes, a black woman, a descendant of people who were kidnapped and bought and sold and treated like property, came to an institution whose history has always favored the people who committed these atrocities. She did not come to protest, or to tell us off, or to show us the error of our ancestors’ ways. She came to share the Gospel with us. She came because she was invited, and she heard in that invitation a call from God to have a little faith in the Episcopal Church. She came to us and bared the soul of her work because she had enough faith to believe that we might listen, and learn, and repent, and grow closer to the kingdom together. Dr. Townes showing up in Sewanee was a wonder, and it was accomplished with a little seed, a spark of faith. I am grateful to have witnessed another miracle of God, because it has given me new eyes with which to read the Gospel with you today.

The Gospel lesson this week is another tough one, one that has been used to justify the kind of slavery that helped build and sustain the school I graduated from back in May, and so many of our churches and institutions. Jesus assumes in this passage that the indentured ownership of other people is a given, a normal part of households of any status or landownership. He assumes that his audience, his own followers, have slaves or have been around them, and that

being served by them is a good and reasonable expectation. Jesus even assumes that it is unnecessary to thank a slave for their work, because it is their job and is to be expected of them. It makes me wince even to read it, knowing that these words of our Lord have been weaponized against his children in the not so distant past. But still, our Scripture reads thus. Jesus has a lesson he wishes to teach us, and we must look closely and with open minds in order to receive it.

The lectionary leaves out the verses that precede the apostles' request for greater faith, and I think we risk losing some perspective without recalling them. The beginning of Luke 17 reads "Jesus^[a] said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ²It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³Be on your guard! If another disciple^[b] sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." Arguably these skipped verses are no less uncomfortable to hear than the story of the slave that we hear this week, but with them in our view we can better see the teaching moment.

Forgiveness is one of the hallmarks of Christian life and faith, both the forgiveness of our sins by God and the forgiveness of our trespasses against one another. Accepting the forgiveness of God is one thing, but OFFERING forgiveness to those who have wronged us is often extremely difficult. It usually takes time, and apologies, and growth and change, for us to truly forgive those who have wounded and betrayed us. And still Jesus calls his disciples with urgency to repent and forgive one another as many times as they sin. No wonder the disciples ask for Jesus' help to do this! The apostles ask for what so many of us wish for- More faith! More faith

in Jesus, in God, in the power of prayer, in healing and forgiveness. Jesus has given the apostles a great charge to be incomprehensibly generous with their forgiveness and inexhaustibly repentant. They hear this and think “if we only had a little more faith, if only we were a little stronger in our trust, if only if only if only”

Jesus replies to them with a reminder of the kinds of wonders they have already seen. They have witnessed firsthand the healing of the sick, the restoration of sight to the blind and the returning to wholeness of those who had been cast out of community. They are coming to believe in Jesus’ holiness, his power and his status as the one who will make all things new. They have witnessed miracles, and in time they will begin to perform them. The things they have already seen and the things they will soon do are accomplished not through great measures of faith, but through the power of God. Jesus tells us that all that is required to perform great acts and wondrous miracles is the smallest of spaces in our hearts being opened to God. The entrance may be only the size of a mustard seed, but even this is enough for God to work wonders. The question is not quantity, but sufficiency. We are not meant to focus on the size of the mustard seed, but on the miracle it produces. To cast an object, rooted deep in the ground, into the sea with only a word of command is a spectacle that is so unimaginable that it might even seem a little ridiculous.

Jesus is not telling us, his disciples, to use our faith as a means to perform great feats of strength or to continue to bend the natural world to our will and convenience. These are not the kind of miracle-workers he expects us to be. Remember what came right before. If the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says I repent, you must forgive. Choosing to accept the repentance of a fellow disciple, choosing to forgive without grudges or retaliation, choosing to pray for the forgiveness not only of our own sins but

of our neighbors' too. That is the greatest feat our faith can accomplish, the miracle our mustard seed hearts are capable of because of the Love of God that swells in them. We are not baptized into being slaves, or masters, but disciples. We are baptized for the forgiveness of sins, for our own sins and for the sins of the world. To repent and forgive is to be a disciple, and to be a disciple is to become a vessel for the wonders of God. Repentance and Forgiveness are miracles. Go and perform them.