

Luke 17:5-10

Thursday I attended a Mental Health Initiative presentation and lunch intended to begin helping in congregations lose the stigma that surrounds mental diseases. One of the women there made a comment that her pastor, when she went to him asking why her sister had died, told her maybe if she'd prayed harder and had more faith her sister would have been healed. I gasped. That is such a terrible thing for a pastor to say to someone, especially a faithful member of their congregation. Yet as I was working on this sermon I understood how the pastor may have mistakenly thought that was what Jesus was saying here. "Have more faith and you can move inanimate objects." But that isn't what Jesus is saying at all. Jesus didn't tell his disciples that they don't have enough faith, but they have the right amount.

The disciples were often asking Jesus to give them more faith. Rightly so, because faith comes from God. However what Jesus is saying in this message is that we need to do what faith requires of us for our faith to grow. Jesus is teaching that a person of faith is like the servant who does their job. He understands the expectations, meets them, and is rewarded.

Some of us may take this story of a slave as Jesus' condoning slavery... it has been used that way. We need to look at the cultural context of this to understand that the Roman society was a slave owning society and the Christian message of freedom re-shaped values throughout the centuries as we grow into the understanding that all persons are valuable because they are made in the image of God. It also gives us the understanding that even though we are freed from the slavery to sin, we have a master to whom we are faithful; that being Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. We grow to understand that we are to be slaves, or servants, to one another as we serve our Lord.

However what was not included in today's gospel reading is the verses that come before this reading, explaining why the disciples want more faith. Verses 1-4 "Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for sin are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come! It 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 sin. Be on your guard! If a brother or sister sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And 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.'" So in actuality Jesus is telling the disciples, who are looking for more faith in order to forgive someone who has repented, Jesus is telling them they have enough faith.

To illustrate his point Jesus tells the story of the role reversal of the slave and master. They knew there was no way a master was going to allow his slave to take it easy and be served, or to even be asked to sit at the master's table. And never would a master say "Thank you" to his slave. His slave was just doing what was expected to be done. In other words, just as the master had the authority to order his slave to serve, the apostles had the authority — and ability — to forgive. Finally, Jesus confirmed that his apostles had the necessary resources to forgive when he told them that they were to declare after forgiving others that they — like slaves — "have done only what we ought to have done!" (homileticonline.com, Oct. 2, 2022).

Some of the most effective tv commercials in recent years have been the Nike ads with the slogan "Just Do It." Surprisingly we could find that slogan in the Old Testament book of Ezra 10:4 when he tells the people, ""Be of good courage and do it." (Or, we could translate it, "Just do it.")

Jesus knew the size of the disciple's faith was not an issue. Only a small drop of faith is necessary to do miraculous things. The disciples were going to have to find another excuse for their reason not to forgive. Yet I think we can sympathize with the disciples in their request for more faith. Aren't we looking for more faith? Don't we sometimes believe that if we had more faith we would be better Christians, more able to live a Christ like life? How often do we pray, "God, give us more faith"?

What Jesus is saying is that we have enough faith. Our faith comes from God in the portion that we need it. And actually we have more faith than we think we do. If we have ever turned on a light switch, filled our car with gas, mailed a letter, flown in an airplane, or ridden in an elevator, believe me, we have faith. Jesus knew the disciple's problem wasn't lack of faith. He knows that it's not our problem either. What we need is to trust, to believe the Bible verse "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

Then we need to put our faith into action. Like the Nike slogan, "Just do it!" But you say, "I don't know what God wants me to do." The answer lays in Micah 6:8 "He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" I think we understand the "love kindness" portion of this set of directions, although sometimes we, myself included, fail to be kind. Walk humbly with your God can be challenging, but it simply means that we realize that in God's world we are all beloved children of God, and treating one another with respect is required. I think the difficult portion of this set of directions is to do justice.

What is justice? It's making sure the persons who are on the margins of society are treated fairly. It means not telling a story or joke that makes fun of a group of people. It's not belittling another person or culture because we don't understand them. It's bringing inequalities to the surface so they can be examined and corrected. It is living out of perfect love. These are things that may not make us popular with humans, but it is what God requires of us. It seems to be unthinkable, unmanageable, unfair. God isn't fair, God is just. And as the hands and feet of Jesus we are called to walk in this pathway.

Jesus is telling us we have enough faith to do this, we only need to trust. God wants us to get into action using the faith we already have. God wants us to "just do it" to "do the best we can with what we've got, where we are, every chance we get." And when we do, amazingly our faith will grow. Miracles occur when Christian people get into action.

Robert C. Morgan in his book, *LIFT HIGH THE CROSS*, tells about a woman who has a gift shop on the Via Doloroso in Jerusalem. Her name is Frieda Hannah. Frieda is a Palestinian Christian. She makes beautiful embroidery and cross-stitch work. Her specialties are altar paraments, clergy stoles, and Bible markers. She is a very frail woman. She has been in business at the same spot, the sixth station of the cross, for more than thirty years. Her eyes are beginning to fail her. She must wear thick glasses. If you go by Frieda's shop you will see her smiling and greeting the tourists. She has made friends with thousands.

Frieda takes the Bible seriously. During the last thirty years, using the earnings from her little shop, she has given over 1,000 Palestinian youth a higher education in North America or Europe. She has built and supported the operation of three medical clinics in the West Bank. She has built and operates two orphanages. There is no way of determining the good that this Christian woman has done over the years.

Frieda Hannah is a modest person. She is always embarrassed to talk about what she does. When asked on one occasion where she gets the energy and determination, she responded, "God did not place me in this world just to take up space. It is not enough just to go along. God wants me to make a difference where I can." (1)

That's it! That's what Jesus was saying to his disciples. Just do it! Make a difference where you can. You already have all the faith you need to perform miracles. All you have to do is get started. And that is Christ's word to us this day.
All glory be to God!

1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 139-140.