

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Proper 22-C; 6 October 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201910071318)

The Mustard Seed

In nomine...

I. Intro

I often like to refer back to my mentors, those people who have inspired me and shaped me in my pursuit of the spiritual life. One of these I knew when Becky and I lived in Birmingham, Alabama for about six months. Greg Newton had been a missionary and church planter in Tanzania. And he had this curious way of counseling those who would come to him asking for spiritual advice.

Something about Greg invited one to make disclosures, to risk speaking truths about your life that you didn't tell many other people. Maybe it was the fact that Greg had a very firm grasp on the concept of God's grace and God's power. Because when you had told Greg about what a miserable sinner you were, his typical response was, "you're in good shape. God has you exactly where God wants you." Now on the one hand, this response was endlessly frustrating. Because I'm not making confession in order to get a little pat on the back: I want answers! On the other hand, it was profoundly encouraging because of the truth contained therein. The fact that I was lamenting my failings and turning my eyes toward God meant that, indeed, God had me "exactly where God wants me."

II. Thesis

Our Gospel passage this week has some strange stuff in it. Some of the strangeness has to do with cultural distance. Some of the strangeness has to do with that guy named Jesus. He said some strange things, some things that were hard to understand, some things that people found disruptive at times.

Let's start with the cultural distance. The NRSV uses the word "slave" throughout this passage, which is a good and culturally appropriate term for the time in which Jesus lived. This was a time when there were lots of slaves. In a big city, sometimes a good half of the population could have the status of slave: to owe their labors and their allegiance to another person. But this wasn't chattel slavery the way we know it from the American south. It was a more regulated, more humane social arrangement. Slaves could be educated, slaves could buy or be given freedom, slavery wasn't a matter of race so much as it was a socio-economic condition. Setting aside that illegal practices of slavery, sexual and otherwise, are still a scourge in our own country and around the world, the closest legal parallel we might come up with today is that of low-wage labor. People stuck in dead-end jobs that let them pay their rent (mostly) and occasionally get a few drinks with friends. Jobs that often require of them lots of odd hours and oddly shaped lives to accommodate the job's demands. Jobs that don't offer a lot of space for advancement or a lot of opportunity to look for something better. Jobs that perpetuate and magnify inequality rather than reducing it.

So on a first reading of this text, I'm a bit put off by the fact that Jesus doesn't call out slavery as evil. But, on the one hand, the institution of slavery of which Jesus is speaking is something significantly different than the one of which we're liable to think. And, on the other hand, Jesus doesn't call it good, either. He just observes it as a social reality, the context in which he is living. Just like so many dark social realities that we would prefer not to think about or acknowledge in the contexts in which we live.

I'm put off, too, by the fact that in this parable, the person with whom I am called to identify is the slave. But maybe that is where we move over into what Jesus is saying as disruptive as well as off-putting.

What Jesus is saying is disruptive because the disciples are ambitious. Like employees who are hungry for a promotion and a raise. "Increase our faith," they say: make us spiritual giants,

people of authority and renown. Give us status like the prophets or other religious leaders. Never mind that prophets were generally reviled and killed in their own lifetimes, and only came to be venerated when they were safely dead and silent.

This is disruptive because Jesus calls the disciples out for their ambition. He actually reproveth them for it, chastises them. In our self-starter, ambitious, gotta-get-ahead, mover-and-shaker world, we can hardly even relate to that. Of *course* we should be ambitious in our faith as in every other aspect of our life! I can hardly even picture what it would mean to live otherwise!

But Jesus admonishes his disciples in a way that takes us right back into our uneasiness around the idea of slavery. Jesus is telling his disciples: Don't get ahead of yourselves. Don't be looking for recognition or respect. Just do your job and be satisfied with that.

III. Good News

So what do we do with *that?!?*

Here's why that's good news.

First of all, Jesus is telling his disciples, "more faith" doesn't matter. "More faith" can never be enough. You and your faith are not going to get you where you need to go. The size of your faith is not going to bring you into greater favor with God. The depth of your faith is not going to make God more likely to hear your prayers. The orthodoxy of your faith is not going to save you from the hard things that come into every life. Nothing you can achieve *on your own* is going to make a real or eternal difference. And if you walk around thinking otherwise, you're just distracting yourself from the real world, living in a religious fairy tale that is only going to disappoint you in the end. That's a religion that will keep you apart from God!

Second of all, says Jesus, if you have just a little faith, faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, just the slightest bit of faith: that is enough. If you are casting your eyes toward God in hope or petition or thanksgiving, that's enough. Because the magnitude of God's power and love for you is so great that the tiniest foot-hold is all God needs to do amazing, world changing things in you and through you. In the midst of your dismay and disappointment, your feelings of uselessness and impotence, those dark nights of the soul where you understand yourself to be

separated from God: that's where God can and will do God's work, unhindered by your lack of understanding or the minute-ness of your faith. Just the tiniest bit is enough! That vague longing or looking for God: it'll do.

IV. Invitation

Of course, the invitation isn't to ignore God. It isn't to sit back and say, Well that'll do. I've been to communion three times this year: I'm officially a communicant. We continue to strive and to grow not because our salvation depends upon it, but for the increase of joy and contentment that we believe we will find in our practice. Just as we tend to our families, our friends, our co-workers, we know that in any relationship we are either growing or things are going sour. So we choose to grow in relationship with God – exactly as God leads us forward. As God invites you forward today!

It's the wanting of God, the wanting to grow, the recognition of our own spiritual poverty, that helps us to turn, to be receptive and open to God. It is right there in that little mustard seed of faith that God has us where God wants us. And it is on that sufficient foundation that God will do unbelievable new things in our lives.

This is why Jesus taught us to pray not "Increase our faith" but "thy will be done." God's will for you and for me is perfect, loving, and better than anything we could ask for. And all it takes to experience that will is the tiniest mustard seed of faith. It is enough. You are enough.

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