

*Psalm 25:4-9*

*Luke 17:5-10*

*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway*

*October 1, 2023*

## Divine Economy

If you were to meet Jesus, the Christ, the real man, you knew it was him, our Lord and Savior, the Son of God, if you were to meet him on the street one day, or here on the Stone Church patio after worship, what would you say to him?

I imagine there are lots of things we might say. Why did you do those things you did, when you were here before? Why did you say that thing that you said? Would you please explain that one parable for me a bit more? Lots of things like that.

Something else we might well ask, once we had gotten beyond our initial shock and sorted out some of those burning questions we have carried with us all these years, we might also ask this same thing the apostles asked at the beginning of our reading for this morning. “Lord, increase our faith!” That would be a good one I think. While we had him here in the flesh. Teach us. Show us. How can we be more faithful, better followers?!

Notice, in the passage we read this morning it was the apostles who asked this of Jesus. It wasn’t the pharisees who were trying to catch him up. It was not a stranger or the anonymous crowds of folks who followed him, listening to his teachings. It was his apostles, his inner circle. Those who were his friends and most familiar with who he was and what he was about. Not that they understood everything, but they were the ones who had committed their lives to him and were eager to learn and follow. So this request makes sense for them too, when they had Jesus in flesh.

Jesus’ response here in Luke could be taken a couple of ways. We could take it as a scolding, a condemnation. In fact, when this same parable of faith like a mustard seed is told in the gospel of Matthew we read that Jesus tells the parable in frustrated response to his disciples being unable to heal a man of his seizures.

After they bring the man to Jesus and he heals him the disciples ask Jesus in private, “Why could we not cast out the man’s demons,” Jesus responses, “because of your little faith.” Then proceeds to tell this parable of faith even as small as a

mustard seed being able to change the landscape. This is kind of the assumed take on this parable. A criticism of the faithful's lack of faith. If only I had more faith.

But what if Jesus here in Luke anyway, is not scolding his apostles after all? What if, as one commentator I read put it, Jesus is, “not clucking his tongue and shaking his head over their lack of faith, but speaking these words in a voice of encouragement and love, as one who would give up his life for those he loves? For us?”<sup>1</sup>

What if Jesus is saying, “You don't need more faith. Even this much faith is enough! You already have the faith you need to do whatever is required of you.” The question is not, ‘How much faith is enough?’ Rather, the question we need to talk about it, ‘What is faith for?’

The context here in Luke is different from what we read in Matthew. Jesus here, had been telling his disciples just how demanding following him is going to be. In the conversation leading up to the verses we read, Jesus tells his friends that they are accountable to one another. In fact, “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, your fellow followers to stumble.” And you may wonder about how forgiving you must be? If some one repents, you must forgive. Regardless. Following Jesus demands a lot of you.

So it is no wonder, in the face of these high demands, these expectations, that the faithful, *even the faithful* might say, we are going to need more of that. “Lord, increase our faith! Help us be better.” And Jesus responds with this assurance. “It is ok. What you have is enough. **You** are enough.”

But he does not leave it there, doesn't leave us there. ‘It's ok. You already have the faith you need. What you need to do now is fulfill its purpose: live it.’<sup>2</sup>

After the story of the mustard seed Jesus goes on to tell this parable of the master and the slave. We have to pause here for a moment to reorient ourselves, moving from our contemporary Western world to Jesus' time when slavery was a part of the fabric of daily life. This parable in his day would have done exactly what it was meant to do: engage his hearers with something with which they are familiar, part of their every day life, and through that familiarity, take them somewhere new.

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<sup>1</sup> Kimberly Bracken Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, pg. 144.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, pg. 142.

Jesus here is describing a relationship. Does a servant deserve congratulation simply for doing their job? Should they be rewarded for doing what is expected? “Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?”

Dr. Kimberly Bracken Long, editor of the Presbyterian publication, *Call to Worship*, writes of this passage, “What Jesus describes is a relationship between master and servant that is marked by mutual accountability and expectation. The master expects the servants to perform their duties, and the servants, in turn, expect that when their work is done, they will receive nourishment and rest and protection.”<sup>3</sup> Mutual accountability and expectation.

Faith is not something to quantify, tallying up how much we have. Rather, faith is a relationship with the One who creates us. Those who serve God, who are faithful to God we know in Jesus Christ, do so with a sense of duty and delight. To put this lens on faith, is to understand **faith as a way of life**. Quoting Dr. Long again,

“To question whether one has enough faith is to miss the mark. The issue at stake is how we live together. How do we keep from harming one another? How do we manage to keep forgiving one another, over and over again? We do it not because we have a superhuman reservoir of faith stored up, but because God gives us what we need to flourish abundantly in faithful community. In the economy of faith, we who serve depend on a benevolent master who not only expects us to obey but gives *us all the is required* to do so. In this divine economy, faith is less about personal fortitude and more about mutual forbearance, as we keep on learning that we are all in this together. Faith is not stockpiled in a storehouse for the working of spiritual wonders, but is **lived out** as obedience to a just and loving God.”<sup>4</sup>

In this divine economy, faith is less about personal fortitude and more about *mutual forbearance*, as we keep on learning that we are all in this together. Faith is lived out in obedience to a just and loving God.

This parable reminds us that we are indeed accountable to one another, connected to one another through our faith in God. It is not a matter of ‘how much’. It is a matter of ‘how to.’ And the answer is through serving and forgiving, sharing talents, gifts, life. Our faith is a way of life, part of our routine.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* pg. 144.

Today is World Communion and Peacemaking Sunday, as we have mentioned and are celebrating today through our music and liturgy. This is a day we particularly lift up our communion and community with one another. We are mindful of our responsibilities to and our connections with one another and our need for the nourishment this table offers. As we gather around the table today may we come in gratitude. May we come in hope, and may we come in faithful service to God and one another.