

Sermon Proper 22, Year C 2016

Lamentations 1:1-6

Psalms 137

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

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I missed you last Sunday when I was leading a Credo conference. These conferences focus on clergy wellness and I work with an incredible team of eight professionals, lay and ordained. Our participants are recently ordained clergy who are leading the Episcopal Church in new and exciting directions. As you might imagine part of our focus is on relationships. George Maxwell, the Vicar of the Cathedral of St. Phillip in Atlanta is the spiritual faculty. Speaking of relationships, he said relationships can only deepen to the extent that we can engage in self-revelation. To the extent that we can open ourselves to one another and let ourselves be known. That really stuck with me.

Life in Christian community is a call to go deeper. The call to mission at its heart is to a deeper connection, with God and one another. Getting to know one another and the struggles of our lives. To reveal ourselves requires trust, opportunity, and vulnerability. In a missional community, people can be vulnerable. At appropriate times, they can answer the question "How are you doing?" with something other than just fine. At key points, we might have a depth of relationship that would allow us to say, "not so well." And have us stop and say, "tell me what's going on." Then as we share our story our connection deepens. Such relationships are not easy to develop in our culture and church can be a safe environment.

However, relationship and familiarity may bring their own complications. The more familiar we are; the more present we are to one another comes the chance to hurt one another. To say or do things without first thinking them

through. Unfortunately, our election season may offer even more opportunity for us to inadvertently hurt one another than usual.

Then when we have been hurt we have to say something. We are to go to the one who hurt us and tell them how we feel about what they said or did. The chance to hear one another provides the opportunity for forgiveness.

I know that I at times say things or have made decisions that hurt people. When I do please come to me. Don't just tell others. We must go to the one who has caused our discomfort.

Then here's the tough part. We have to share our discomfort and must listen to one another. If we have offended someone, we must ask forgiveness. And if asked for forgiveness, then we must forgive. While it's easier to just go and complain to someone else. "You won't believe what just happened to me!" "You won't believe what so and so said and how much it hurt me." If we are to deepen relationships, we have to go back and have a conversation about what has hurt us. From my experience this is never easy, but it's the only way forward. As long as the tape keeps playing in our heads/memory, nothing changes. We have to take action. And that action is not sharing the event with others. Action is going to the one who caused our discomfort and telling them so. Not easy. But with prayer for strength and courage, we can do it.

That is the prelude and context for our gospel lesson this morning. In the verses that precede the lesson we heard, this is what Jesus says the disciples have to do. Jesus has called his disciples to be ready to forgive, over and over. But the disciples feel this is impossible. There is no way they can live the life that Jesus demands without more faith. So that is the context for their request to increase their faith.

Then Jesus responds with his curious response, "if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could move a mulberry tree." What is Jesus really saying?

Well, we have to understand this peculiar phrase. The Greek language has two types of clauses that begin with the conjunction "if," contrary and conditional. A contrary clause is the one that expresses a condition contrary to

the fact. Such an “if” clause might sound like this. “If I were you, I wouldn’t be texting while driving.” If I were you, I wouldn’t do what you are doing.

The second type of “if” clause, which is less frequently used, states a condition according to fact (conditional). Such a clause might begin “if Jesus is our Lord, then our life should be thanksgiving.” The “if” clause that Jesus is using after the disciples cry for more faith is one of the the second type, a conditional clause. Jesus says, “If you had faith.” This conditional “if” clause might more clearly be translated, **“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed (and you do), you could move a mulberry tree.”** Jesus’ response is not a reprimand as we might at first think. Rather Jesus says they have all the faith they need and more. As such it is an invitation to live out the full possibilities of that faith.

Faith you see is a little paradoxical. Jesus is telling the disciples they have all the faith they need. They simply need to act out of the faith they possess. Because living out of our faith will bring God’s power to bear upon the needs of the world.

Faith is complex. As we grow and mature in life, our thinking changes. Our ability to grapple with questions and concepts changes. We move from concrete thinking, understanding what we can see and touch, to abstract reasoning, comprehending and reflecting upon things that are unseen. This develops over time with experience and the ability to be reflective. Sometimes this occurs with age but not always.

Faith is an abstract concept. Many who struggle with faith approach it from a concrete perspective. If I cannot see and touch the divine, I won’t believe. This echoes the Apostle Thomas’ statement the evening of the resurrection. “Unless I see the mark of the nails and touch his side, I will not believe.” Thomas spoke for many. When Jesus returned for him, Thomas believed.

Belief is an element of faith. Faith is composed of conviction, assurance and trust. Faith will always seem abstract. Through faith, we come to know that God is with us. Or as the writer of 2nd Timothy expressed it, “with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.”

The preacher, Fred Craddock says, "Faith lays hold of God." (Craddock, Interpretation, p. 200). Faith lays hold of God, trusting that God is connected with us. In turn, God will assist us in making connection with others, in living into God's hope for us.

Relationship with God comes in and through our opening our lives through acts of self-revelation. Sharing our hopes and dreams, wishes and needs through prayer. Or through crisis and our calls for help.

Faith lays hold of us, lays claim to our lives. This is what Jesus is addressing in the gospel's concluding parable. In the concluding parable Luke speaks of slaves and their relationship to masters. Fortunately, this relationship does not translate in our culture today.

But I think Jesus is saying, as disciples living into the faith that God has given us, we are to work and work, to serve and serve. And our work doesn't promote us one over another. We are always living our lives in service to God and to one another. No, we don't earn any merit badges.

Jesus says, "If you had faith, and you do!" So, we don't stop. So we keep on keeping on. What does that faith look like?

Well, it looks like going deeper in relationship with those we meet here. Being willing to reveal our lives in relationship. Risking our faith by inviting people to church, knowing that not all will accept the invitation. Faith looks like continuing to teach Sunday school after our own children are grown. Participating in outreach projects where we get to know fellow parishioners and others from the community. Continuing to support ministries when we can't clearly see the progress and don't receive the thanks or appreciation that we thought we deserved. We move in and out of ministry areas inviting others into leadership roles. We listen to the invitations that others extend to us, trusting that in those invitations may just be God's desire for us. We join in God's redemptive mission in the world through sharing the gifts of our time and abilities, as well as our financial support. As faithful stewards of all that God has given us.

We keep on keeping on because “We’re all in!” Disciples of Jesus who are connected to one another in all ways and always.

Faith is day by day putting one foot in front of another to walk in God’s ways, worshipping, praying, learning, and serving, being the church of God in this place and bearing witness to God’s ongoing work in the world. Being vulnerable with God and with one another. Jesus wants us to know that we have all the faith that it takes. And this is the life of faith that God is calling us and the church towards. A life committed to being a beacon of hope shining God’s love in relationship with the people around us. This kind of life is not easy but Jesus is with us always enabling us to do more than we can ask or imagine. If you had faith, and you do, you will work wonders.