

**Year C, Pentecost 20**

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**Thomas L. Truby**

**Luke 17:5-10**

### **The Power of Forgiveness**

Have you ever wondered why the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith? It's there in the text but the lectionary reading doesn't include it. Jesus has just told them, "Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, 'I am changing my ways,' you must forgive that person."

Jesus is saying the disciples must forgive if they want to be his followers, period! There is no limit to forgiveness. Forgiveness is a way of living not just something you do once and it's done. When that driver ahead of you cuts you off, you immediately let it go, rather than allow it to burn in your consciousness. Even if he does it seven times, you let it go all seven times. You don't let him get under your skin. Looking at it that way forgiveness is really hard! In fact, it's so hard the apostles reply "Lord, Increase our faith!" Unless you change us somehow we can't do that! We can't forgive seven times! We can't live with forgiveness as a way of living.

Jesus replies to them with this wild image where he says if they have faith the size of a mustard seed they could cause a mulberry tree to uproot itself and be transplanted in the sea and it would. What was he talking about? How does that relate to their request?

Jesus' response almost makes fun of them. They want more faith and he tells them if they had an amount of faith the size of a mustard seed they could do things they thought were impossible. They are claiming they need more faith and he tells them if they acted on the tiniest bit of faith they already have they will have plenty. He's not buying they need something more from him before they can forgive. They just need to forgive.

I found the next sentence very hard to understand when I first read it. Jesus goes on, "Would any of you say to your servant, who had just come in from the field after plowing or tending sheep, 'Come! Sit down for dinner'? Wouldn't you say instead, 'Fix my dinner. Put on the clothes of a table servant and wait on me while I eat and drink. After that, you can eat and drink?'" I have to admit, I am offended. It sounds like Jesus is endorsing human servitude and implying that it's ok to order people around and exploit them even though they are tired. He goes on, "You won't thank the servant because the servant did what you asked, will you?" I guess not, but that is certainly not how I want to treat people.

Then Jesus shifts to the perspective of the servants and tells them, "In the same way, when you (servants) have done everything required of you, you should say, 'we servants deserve no

special praise. We have only done our duty.” This whole dialogue leaves me cold and a little bewildered. How is it responding to the disciples request for more faith, a request they made when they were told if they wanted to be his followers they needed to live constantly forgiving?

Looking at this from a different angle, I think Jesus is saying forgiving is just what you do when you are a disciple. It’s not exemplary, it is expected. It’s not something you do thinking you will be praised, it’s just something you do because you are a servant. It goes with the territory. To be a disciple is to forgive. It’s what disciples do.

In this story from Luke, all of this happens before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. While he has hinted at where he’s going they can’t possibly understand that soon all humanity will turn on Jesus and do to him what we always do to someone or some group so as to siphon off the tensions between us. And when we are in the midst of doing what we always do, Jesus will forgive us. “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” Jesus will enact the very thing he tells his disciples they must do. At the crucifixion Jesus himself becomes the servant of God who forgives us and in that shows us the way of forgiveness. He provides a most powerful example of what we are to do in our lives in all ways. Here is a leader who sets an example and asks us to do as he has done.

So this is the first point we away from this passage. Jesus wants his followers to forgive as a way of life.

Now it seems to me there is a second point that has something to do with the capacity to say to a mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” Ordinarily mulberry trees grow in the fencerow not the sea. And they are not easy to uproot. What did Jesus mean? Is he saying that if his followers were to live forgiveness, the impact on the world would surprise them and exceed anything they can imagine?

Do you remember a few years ago when this man went to a small Amish school in Pennsylvania and killed several girls? The Amish believe you must forgive as an act of faith. Even though they were torn to shreds by the event they acted in a way that was forgiving. In addition to forgiving the shooter they also helped his family. The whole world watched in disbelief and asked how they could do that. They replied it’s just what we do. As followers of Jesus we forgive. Even when they didn’t feel like it, they forgave. It was a discipline, a practice, a core dimension to their identity. The Amish community understood that the families of the girls would be shattered and they put their arms around them and in addition they also forgave the man who did the shooting as an act of faith. “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

I often think about Nine-eleven. We were senselessly attacked and three thousands of us were killed. The whole world looked on in horror and sympathy. Their hearts bled for us. What did

we do? We hardened our hearts and set out to punish someone. We had to attack and destroy as retribution for having been attacked. We called it justice but it was really revenge. Nobody knows how many people died, maybe 100,000 maybe more (we didn't keep track of their dead) and it's still not over. And the people we attacked weren't even the people who attacked us. Our desire for revenge was so powerful it distorted our ability to think clearly.

Suppose we as a nation had decided to follow Jesus and forgive. It's hard to imagine isn't it. It feels as strange as a mulberry tree being uprooted and planted in the sea. But suppose we decided to follow Jesus and actually forgive our attackers. We absorbed the blow rather than immediately taking up arms and attempting to reassert our control and dominance in the world by attacking someone in the Middle East. Would we be perceived as weak or as strong in our reserve and self-confidence if we had taken our time and decided on a response that began with forgiveness? Maybe there was something we could have learned about ourselves from these people who hate us so. But we didn't listen. We just reacted.

When our Lord said, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you" he is talking about the power of forgiveness. Not just its personal power but its power in international relations. If we can get either side to let go of their antagonism and their assumption that the problem is entirely with the other side, if you could get them to forgive long enough to listen, amazing shifts can happen. Would this be true in Northern Ireland? I think so.

To have faith the size of a mustard seed is to forgive. It's what followers of Jesus do. When we forgive we discover we have the power to move mulberry trees and maybe even bring peace to our world—the power of forgiveness! Amen.