

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – October 2, 2016

“Use Our Faith”

Scripture: Luke 17: (4) 5-10

Note: Preached only during the 9:00 a.m. service.

The Rev. Lisa Wiens Heinsohn preached during the 11:00 a.m. service for the Blessing of the Animals.

Good morning.

Now, if I say some things this morning that are not entirely understandable, I hope that you will forgive me.

And if I gloss over those parts of the scripture that you think are most important, please, forgive me.

Now, I realize some of you may have difficulty hearing, so I will try to speak up. But if I do lower my voice, I am sorry. Can you forgive me?

And if I carry on a bit too long here in the pulpit and cut into your plans for the rest of the day, I can only ask that you forgive me.

And, really, I must ask your forgiveness for this silly opening vignette, but when you hear why I have subjected us to it, I trust you will forgive me...

Because I simply cannot find a way to understand this little passage from Luke's gospel without understanding what it is that caused such an outburst in Jesus'

disciples in the first place when they cry out: “Increase of faith!” Why? What for? What impossibility has Jesus asked of them? Is he asking that they work miracles? Do they have to replicate the loaves and fishes feasts? Must they raise the dead? Has he asked them to levitate, or to end war, or to understand the weirdness of the current presidential election cycle? Why do these people need more faith? And the answer lies in what may be the most difficult thing of all...

Just before we join the disciples in our reading for today, Jesus has been talking with them, and he says, *“Be on your guard! ... 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.”*

No! Way! Seven times a day I am offended by one person, and seven times they have a change of heart, then seven times I must acquiesce and offer them one of the most precious resources in all of Creation... forgiveness. No wonder the disciples cry out: *“Increase our faith!”* Jesus not only asks the impossible; he asks the ridiculous. But apparently he seems to believe he asks the obvious. He says that in offering such lavish forgiveness, we are only doing what we are supposed to do. Don’t expect a medal, or any special treatment, or recognition as a hero. *“We have only done what we ought to have done.”* And, you know, perhaps he is right.

Which one of us walks through this world with such equanimity ---with such composure, understanding, and perfection--- that we have not offended some other, in ways we may have intended or in ways we have not intended, so that we stand in need of forgiveness from them? Who among us has always done what is right, always spoken only in words of kindness, never failed to help another in times of need, never chosen the wrong thing? Have we never been a source of offense to another? Have we always put the needs of others before our own when the situation warranted it? Have we always held our tongues in times of anger? See, I imagine that would be the true miracle... that somehow we can move through this life without sometimes needing forgiveness, sometimes needing a lot of forgiveness, maybe even “seven times a day” forgiveness. Because we are not perfect. And because this world is not fair, and its resources are not fairly accessible to all. And because sometimes people have treated us in awful ways, and we don’t want to forgive. And sometimes we have treated people in awful ways, and we don’t know how we can ever be forgiven. I understand that. In some situations, forgiveness just seems the impossible miracle. Please, Jesus, if that is where you are asking us to go, increase our faith.

Now I want to say a couple things... First, I believe Jesus is absolutely right. In forgiving others, we have only done what we ought to have done, because we all stand in need of forgiveness. If we aren’t generous in that act, we just build a world where resentments, self-loathing, violence in word or deed, and endless grudges lock

us into cycles of destruction and despair. If you need evidence for this, just check the current news cycle around the world. People are hurting, so people are hurting each other. Second, I don't think forgiveness is either simple or perfunctory. Perhaps it should be ordinary, as Jesus seems to say, but I won't say it's easy. When we have been hurt, it can be hard to forgive. I do not believe in the old adage of "forgive and forget", because I think that isn't possible. Forgiveness is something more than forgetting. To forgive is to remember, yet to set aside blame in order to take up responsibility... the responsibility to heal, the responsibility to practice compassion, the responsibility to give the memory of hurts done to us no ultimate power over us, or the responsibility to change our ways. To forgive is to trust that in acting as God calls us to act, by not holding the sins of others against them, God is acting to forgive our sins as well. I'm not saying there is no pain. I'm not saying we can "pay" someone back for the hurt we have caused. I am saying that to forgive, and to accept the forgiveness of others, opens the door for healing for both offended and offender. That is what I believe Jesus says in forgiving we have only done what we ought to have done.

So, here's some good news. The disciples, upon hearing this impossible requirement, cry "Increase our faith." But Jesus is reminding them, you don't really need a lot to get there. I'm not really big on this "commoditization of faith" thing anyway, like you can possess a lot of faith or a little faith, or possess faith at all, rather

than accept faith for the gift it is. Maybe we can think about it like this... If my car has ten gallons of gas in it, and I want to drive a mile at 60 miles per hour, no problem. I can hit the accelerator and do that. But... if my car only has one gallon of gas in it, and I want to drive a mile at 60 miles per hour... well... still no problem! I can hit the accelerator and do that. All the faith we need to work miracles, to be forgiving people, to share life and hope with others, to find healing from hurts, to offer healing for hurts, is contained in the mustard seeds that are us. The tiniest of seeds we may be, but God can use for good whatever we bring and make big things happen. Maybe we don't need to ask "Increase our faith." Maybe we just need to ask for the will and guidance to use the faith we have.