

Sermon for Sunday, October 2, 2016

MOVING MOUNTAINS

We have gathered here this morning to worship God and to celebrate communion with God and with each other, to enjoy that remarkable fellowship of love made possible in Jesus Christ. But more than that, today our celebration of the Lord's Supper is not as parochial as usual. Today we celebrate with the world, with Christians of every race, nationality, color and social standing, to demonstrate the unity we have around the table of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Yet, we know that unity is fractured and fragile. There is still, even after two thousand years of Christian ministry, much that divides us. We, the family of humankind and the children of God, are divided by race and nationality, by social class and economic well-being, by color and appearance, by capabilities and achievements, by sickness and health, and perhaps most shamefully by church and religion. For fifteen minutes this week we will celebrate unity. Then for the remainder of this week we will contribute through our pride, our envy, our competitiveness, our self-righteousness, our fear, our greed, our jealousy and our loathing to that which builds, sanctions, and perpetuates the barriers that separate us from each other. God have mercy upon us because we are indeed, poor servants of the gospel.

Now I don't mean to drag us into a pit of despair this morning by helping us acknowledge our complicity in that which puts us at odds with one another. But I do want us to feel a bit like the disciples felt right before Jesus spoke the lessons of our New Testament reading today. He had been addressing his disciples and the good church folk with a whole series of parables designed to level the playing field between good and bad, between sinner and saint, between rich and poor, sick and healthy. Jesus whole ministry was to remove whatever keeps us from living with each other as we ought to. And then he concludes these stories by telling his disciples that they must be on their guard to forgive those who sin, not once, not twice, not even three times, but without limit, because they may, in fact, have contributed to their neighbors sin by creating the conditions for them to stumble.

The disciples are overwhelmed. They cry out, "Increase our faith!" But Jesus' response to their good appeal is devastating. "Increase your faith? Your problem isn't that you don't have enough faith, but that you don't have any." "If you did have faith, even as little as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

Is this literally true? If we had even a tiny amount of faith, could we uproot a tree or, as Matthew and Mark put it, move a mountain? Is the ability to uproot trees and move mountains the mark of having faith? Is this the test of being a follower of Jesus?

Of course not! Jesus does not ask us to believe that if we had faith we could uproot trees or move mountains. He is making a comparison of the difficulty we have uprooting trees and moving mountains with the difficulty we have with forgiving each other and overcoming the barriers between us. We are not called upon to move mountains. Rather we are to forgive each other's transgressions and to strive to remove the vicious barriers that cause so much suffering, so much isolation, and so much conflict. The absence of an urgent desire to forgive and be reconciled is the sign of a lack of faith.

The issue then, is not an increase in faith, but the existence of any faith at all. The test is not whether we can move mountains, but whether we can forgive those who repent of having injured us, not once, but again and again and again. Jesus tells us that we can overcome the mountainous barriers between us if we have just a little bit of faith—faith in the way of life he reveals to us, faith in a generous

God who does not place meaningless burdens on us, faith in a Lord who forgives us again and again as we grope our way through life, still not fully in control of our ambitions, our jealousies, and our pettiness.

Faith levels the playing field. Faith reminds us that we are all children of God, that we are all rebellious children of God, and that all of us are utterly dependent on God's forgiveness and mercy. As we are forgiven, so we need to forgive one another. Jesus message is as simple, and as profound, and as revolutionary as that.

We are in the thick of the national election cycle and I'm already weary of the attack ads. They urge me to be angry, critical, and uncharitable. They invite me to respond to my worst tendencies, and to pass judgment on others that fail to live up to my standards. They are designed to unlevel the playing field, to preserve those mountains that divide us, and those barriers that can provide candidates with power, with prestige, and with votes. They want us to be resentful and cynical, not charitable and hopeful. They want us to ignore our faith, to doubt God's ability to heal our conflicts and divisions, and to trust that a candidate for election can cure our ills. Tragically, attack ads are effective.

One of the reasons people go through life with unhealed resentments and cynicism about God's power to heal and reconcile is a lack of gratitude. Jesus teaches us that just as faith and forgiveness are connected, gratitude and forgiveness are too. But the gratitude Jesus wants us to have is far different from the gratitude we want. We want God to be grateful for our faithfulness, to be generous toward us for our good behavior, to reward us for living moral and ethical lives and for being solicitous and forgiving toward our neighbors. But Jesus teaches us that God is not grateful to us for our obedience in forgiving others, in becoming reconciled to others, as if we have done something extra special. Forgiving one another and being reconciled to each other is how God intends us to live and how God commanded us to live. To do so is simply to have done what is expected of us. When we feel we are owed gratitude, we are not truly grateful, even if the gratitude is given.

The gratitude Jesus wants us to enjoy is the gratitude of a heart that has received a serendipitous and undeserved gift of unsurpassed value. To have faith is to be grateful to God for the good that comes our way, and to recognize that the bad that comes our way is a consequence of human rebellion.

We are showered every day with God's good gifts. But all too often we take those gifts for granted; they are not received as gifts at all. If they were, we would not only praise God, but we would seek reconciliation with our brothers and sisters. For among the gifts of God is forgiveness which, when received and not taken for granted, makes us grateful. It makes us generous toward those who injure us and seek to be reconciled to us. The kingdom of God cannot be taken for granted. Its reception is marked by gratitude toward God and generosity toward those who injure us.

This communion feast of which we are about to partake is the joyful feast of the people of God. It is joyful because it is a meal of thanksgiving, a praise of gratitude for the forgiveness and reconciliation we have received as a gift in Christ. It is meant to break down barriers between us, to remind us that the playing field of life is level and that all the glory belongs to God. If we believe that, and live that, the walls that divide us will come tumbling down, and the mountains that seem so impossible to surmount will be cast into the sea.

PRAYER: Gracious Lord, you have been merciful to us. Give us faith enough to be grateful for your mercy, that we may be merciful to others, for the sake of your kingdom come and your beloved son. Amen.

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Luke 17:5-10