

## Faith and Obedience

Lk 17:5-10

At first blush, today's gospel seems to be about everything modern people can't stand about Christianity, because, at first blush, today's gospel seems to be talking about magic followed by put-downs.

Magic as in, if my faith is good enough, I can order trees out of the ground and into the sea, to which we modern people say: "uh huh...."

Put downs because Jesus says we are mere slaves who should do our jobs and shut up about it, words that especially for people of color, women, indigenous people, those who have been historically oppressed, are beyond insulting.

But as we continually learn in our journey together, when it comes to Jesus, things are rarely as they seem at first blush, and today is no different.

What gets the disciples to yell out: "Increase our faith!" is what's happening just before the reading, when Jesus says to them:

"Be alert. If you see your friend going wrong, correct him. If he responds, forgive him. Even if it's personal against you and repeated seven times through the day, and seven times he says, 'I'm sorry, I won't do it again,' forgive him." Lk 17:3-4.

Which is what leads the disciples to say: "Are you out of your mind??!!" or, as translated from the Greek: "Increase our faith!"

Here's the thing.

We so often think of faith as something like increasing my pectoral muscles at the gym....if I just do all of my spiritual push ups, why then I can move trees from ground to ocean.

But the problem with this approach is right there in the thinking:

"I" ... "My" ... "Me" ..... "Mine" ....

And Jesus comes along and says, you've got it exactly backwards.

**You** cannot forgive endlessly, **you** cannot increase **your** faith, just like **you** cannot earn or deserve your salvation.....it's all gift from God, and the secret to finding the power to uproot trees is not increasing spiritual muscles, its learning to let go, to surrender, to trust — and in that trust, discovering that what I cannot do, God can, which includes forgiving Uncle Ernie or boss man or spouse or child and even myself, over and over again.

That's why a "mustard seed of faith" is so amazing, because even a little bit of trust in God can and does move mountains.

Which gets us to the next fun part of today's lesson: Obedience.

When you mention the word "obey" in polite company, you'll be greeted with the hairy eyeball or outright hostility.

We erased it from our marriage vows; with good reason, of course, since the obedience that was intended to go both ways ended up going in one direction only.

But "obey" as Jesus uses it has nothing to do with oppression or misuse of others, it's not a domination game, it's the door to our liberation!

Jesus knows very well that as human beings -- we are bound to obey something!

Even in the American culture of rugged individualism, isn't it amazing how so many "individuals" wear the same jeans, admire the same celebrities, sell out their lives for just a few more dollars?

"Freedom," as humanity defines it, is often just another word for conformity.

But what Jesus offers is real freedom, and it is freedom learned through obedience not to pop culture or flag waving or power, but obedience to the gentle God who made us for herself.

So what is it to obey God?

In the civil rights movement of the 1960's, black demonstrators uprooted centuries of vile oppression with songs of hope and marches of non-violence.

In South Africa, after the horror of apartheid ended, the Truth and Reconciliation panels steered that nation away from what most predicted would be a bloody civil war into mountains moved by confessions of fault and expressions of reconciliation, allowing a nation to heal!

We just said aloha to Fr Dan Berrigan, a Jesuit priest who led innumerable peaceful assaults on the weapons and symbols of war, burning draft cards, throwing blood on nuclear weapons, spending years in prison, all in an effort turn us back from the brink of holocaust, as mulberry trees float down the river.

Closer to home, right here at St. E's we have worked with our Micronesian brothers and sisters, holding rallies and marches to get decent, affordable medical care, to treat

diseases our own government introduced so long ago during the weapons testing in the South Seas.

And there are those who struggled with the people of Hale Mohalu, when the State tried to evict these long suffering Hansen's disease patients to make way for a ball field.

Instead today, there are hundreds of low cost housing units in the heart of Pearl City for the ill and the elderly, because with faith, hearts were uprooted and minds transformed, and that work continues today as government and business leaders are pressured to create housing that our own people can afford.

What is it that Christians are to obey?

Whom do we obey and what does our obedience look like?

Obedience is doing what we are told to do, whether we like it or not; whether it makes sense to us or not, whether it wounds our ego or not.

And yet, this obedience doesn't depend on some powerful human ability or on a highly developed morality or some kind of superior coping mechanism, because when we obey the way of God, we are acting in line with who we are in the first place, creatures made in God's image and likeness.

Obedience therefore makes us normal ... and it really is a matter of ... just doing it.

And so, we obey when we forgive seven times seventy times.

We obey when we refuse to engage in revenge.

We obey when we let go of trying to control people, places and things, trusting that God will, in the end, make all things right.

We obey when we accept all people of whatever background or faith or language as our sisters and brothers.

We obey when we insist that our local, state and national governments serve the poor, the needy and the vulnerable.

We obey when we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, when we visit the sick and the prisoner.

Jesus never says obedience is an easy thing, but nor does it require super powers...

When we obey, we unlock the power of faith, the power of trust, and when you do, you will witness,

-- mountains of anger being brought low into meadows of serenity;

-- trees of resentment uprooted and planted in gardens of peace;

-- valleys of despair that are transformed into hillsides of hope!

Martin Luther King, Jr, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Fr. Dan Berrigan, Archbishop Tutu, Caesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, St. Damian, and so many of you here in these pews, are testaments to the power that transforms nations and peoples — this power of faith — this power of trust — which is unleashed through the humility, through the weakness, of obedience.

Obedience to the itinerant preacher from Galilee who welcomes all, forgives all, who dies for all, because indeed he becomes a slave for us all, and as he kneels and washes your feet and mine, can you hear the gentle whisper in your ear: "follow me!"

The Sufi Muslims tell this story about Jesus.

He stands by the river selling water.

He sees what is possible, and with all of his skill, with all of his depth, he aims to help others see what he sees, ..., mulberry trees, one after the other, floating down the river, on their way out to sea. Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels*, 283, paraphrased.

Jesus beckons us to follow.

So let's be on our way!

And after we have done all we have been commanded to do, forget the pat on the back and put aside that daydreaming about a reward coming our way.

Let us say instead, with quiet satisfaction:

"The work is done.

What we have been told to do, we have done."

+amen

