

Mulberry Trees

Today we celebrate the feast of St. Francis.

He was that rich young man who had a vision of Jesus talking to him from the San Damiano cross.

Jesus begged him to "please save my church."

The church at the time of St Francis was much like the church today.

Too caught up with rules and regulations, too caught up with human egos that tirelessly seek to undermine the central challenges of the gospel.

St Francis famously stripped off all of his fine clothes in the middle of a busy street, renouncing his father's riches and lifestyle, as he handed himself over to God.

The feast of St. Francis could not be more appropriate given the readings that we have today.

These strange readings that invite us to look deeply into the challenge Jesus lays before each and every one of us.

Our story begins with the disciples hollering out: "Increase our faith!"

They say that because Jesus has just said to them this; words that come just before today's lesson:

"Be alert.

If you see your friend going wrong, correct him.

If he responds, forgive him.

Even if it's 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.

That's what leads the disciples to say:

"Increase our faith!" or, translated literally, "Are you out of your mind?!!!"

Now let's be clear from the start.

Jesus isn't talking about using forgiveness as a reason to stay in abusive relationships.

If you're in one, get out, today!

Nor is he talking about forgiveness to excuse the injustices that keep so many oppressed and wounded.

Indeed, the faith Jesus calls us to is a faith that confronts injustice and inequality and all forms of racism, nationalism and tribalism.

So with that understanding, let's begin.

We so often think of faith as something like building up my biceps at the gym.

If I just do all of my spiritual pull ups, why then I can move trees from ground to ocean.

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

It's thinking that's all wrapped up with "I," "Me" and "Mine."

In short, it's all about ego.

And what is our ego?

What we come to discover on any spiritual journey is that our ego is our false self.

It's the image we create for ourselves and that other people add to, an image that we come to believe is actually who we are.

But we aren't made in our own image, nor are we made in the image of other people.

We are made in God's image!

And here lies the central struggle in every human life: moving from who we think we are to who we truly are.

The ego pushes me to look for money, fame and power.

The ego berates me as a no good loser when bad stuff happens in my life.

The ego measures me against the judgments of others, the standards of a consumer society, the loud voices of dysfunctional parents, now long dead, but who still have power over my life.

In the spiritual life, the ego says: "I can create my own salvation, as long as I'm better than her, as long as I cross my T's and dot my I's, why, God owes me salvation!"

And Jesus says, that's not the way it is.

"Wake up and discover who you truly are, and to whom you truly belong!"

The truth is, you cannot forgive endlessly, you cannot increase your faith, nor can you earn or deserve your salvation.

It's all a gift from God!

Because the secret to finding the power to uproot mulberry trees is not found by increasing my spiritual muscles, its learning to let go, to surrender, to trust — and in that trust, discovering that what I cannot do, God can!

St Francis got this!

Giving up his wealth and power didn't reduce him to nothing, it opened the door to everything!

Francis came to see that God needs an open hand into which he can pour his blessings, because a fist clenched with the false illusions of ego cannot receive anything.

It is ego that causes us to see the bar of faith way up there.

Ego says, "you shall spend a lifetime reaching for it and you shall always fall short."

But in fact, when I let go, when I open my hand in empty-ness, lo and behold, "love steps in and places the bar on the ground, and, with astonishment at the simplicity of it all, I trip over it, falling into the loving arms of God." T. Merton.

That's why a "mustard seed of faith" can and does move mountains, because it's God who does the moving, not me!

Along with faith is another word Jesus utters today, a word so bothersome to modern people.

That word is: obey.

When you mention the word "obey" in polite company, you'll likely be greeted with a sneer or even 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 one way 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 that we human beings will obey **something!**

Just look at our American culture of rugged individualism!

Isn't it amazing how so many "individuals" look and sound exactly alike?

“Freedom,” as humanity defines it, usually means “conforming.”

But what Jesus offers is real freedom.

A freedom we discover through obedience, not to pop culture or flag waving, but obedience to the gentle God who made us, unique unto ourselves, each of us called to play a particular, and crucial part, in the unfolding story of salvation.

What does it mean to obey God?

It’s different for all of us, but here’s a few examples.

Just last week, a young Dutch woman, Greta Thunberg, dared world leaders to face the existential threat of climate change, insisting that what humanity can harm, humanity can heal.

In the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, and today’s Black Lives Matter movement, long oppressed people uproot centuries of oppression with songs of hope and marches of non-violence, tossing trees of racism into the river.

Right here at St. E’s, our Franciscans and Catholic Workers and so many here in these pews are a daily example of obedience, as the indignity and insecurity of houselessness and incarceration and poverty is met with compassion, warm meals and clean clothes.

And yet, this obedience doesn’t depend on some powerful human ability or on a highly developed morality or some kind of superior coping skill.

When we obey God, we find ourselves floating in the stream of who we truly are, creatures made in God’s image and likeness.

Obedience to God makes us normal.

Obedience to our ego makes us abnormal.

And so, we obey God 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 beloved 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.

When we obey, we release the illusions of ego and unlock the power of faith, and wouldn't you know, but,

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

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

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

Alicia Garza and Patrice Khan-Cullors, the co-founders of Black Lives Matter, Mahatma Gandhi, whom Martin Luther King Jr called the truest

representative of Christianity in the 20th century, Fr. Dan Berrigan, Archbishop Tutu, Caesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, St. Damian, and so many of you, are testaments to the power that transforms nations and peoples – this power of faith – unleashed through humility, weakness, and obedience.

Obedience to the itinerant preacher from Galilee who welcomes all, forgives all, who dies for all, because indeed he becomes a slave for all!

As he kneels and washes your feet and mine, can you hear the gentle whisper in your ear?

“Follow me!”

And after we have done all we have been led to do, each in our own way, we can, with St Francis, say to those who come after us, “I have done what is mine to do.

Now, go, and do what is yours to do.”

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