

Obey

Today, the disciples ask Jesus to “give us more faith,” as if faith is something like gas for an empty car or food for a hungry stomach.

And if we listen to Jesus’ response only in English, we are likely to mishear what he is actually saying.

We are likely to hear a put down by Jesus, when in fact no put down is intended.

What we hear in English is: “If you have just a speck of faith (which you obviously don’t, being the unspoken jab in the gut), then you could tell that tree to jump in the lake, and it will!”

But the English isn’t true to what Jesus is actually saying.

So, even though it’s an early Sunday morning, stand by for a very brief lesson in Greek.

Stay with me! No nodding off!

In Greek, the word for “if” can be used in two ways: as in “If I were you (which I’m not) then...”

And it’s in that sense that it seems, at first blush, that Jesus is speaking: “If you had a smidgen of faith (which you don’t.....)

But the other way the Greeks used “if” goes like this: “If Jesus Christ is your Lord, then....”

One way uses the word “if” to point to a reality that doesn’t exist -- and the other way points to a reality that does exist.

Of course Jesus is your Lord -- you are all baptized, faithful, worshipping Christians!

So when Jesus says: “if you have a kernel of faith ... you can do great things,” he’s in fact saying, “You ALREADY HAVE a kernel of faith, Millie and Charlie and David and Bill and Patsy and all of you here -- you ALREADY HAVE THAT SMIDGEN OF FAITH --- and because you already have it, you can do great things!

The question isn't whether you and I have the faith we need to move mountains, the question is: How do we unlock that faith?

How do we get to it?

And for that, I point you to the second part of today's gospel, which is all about --- obedience.

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

It's a word that's long since been kicked out of our marriage vows; not without some justification, of course, since over time, the obedience that was intended to go both ways ended up going in one direction only.

But that's another sermon best left for another day.

But "obey" as Jesus uses it has nothing to do with the skewed obedience that we are used to inflicting on one another.

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

Even though we pride ourselves on our individual freedoms, isn't it amazing how so many "individuals" flock to the same fashion statements or march in lock step into this war or after that celebrity.

"Freedom," as humanity defines it, is too often just a cover for mass conformity.

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

So with fists unclenched and eyes wide open, let us spend a few moments considering what it is to obey God.

How does obedience unlock a faith that can uproot trees and dislodge mountains?

Let's look close to home.

In the U.S. military, what we honor and respect about our men and women in uniform is that they are trained to obey.

They obey orders not only when those orders have them cleaning latrines in the pouring rain, but they obey even when obedience places them in grave danger, even in situations that might lead to serious injury and death.

They obey when it's bad for their ego and they obey when they'd rather not.

And from that obedience they have formed the most powerful military force the world has ever seen.

Now granted, much of the obedience that the military engages in is obedience to values that are very often not at all consistent with the Way of Jesus.

It is often obedience to values such as "might makes right" and to the values of "kill or be killed," to the values of "country first."

Jesus himself recognizes the power of military obedience when the hated Roman centurion pleads with Jesus to heal his sick servant.

When Jesus offers to go to his house to perform the healing in person, the centurion tells him no need, just say the word, because obedience is something the centurion understands and lives out.

And Jesus marvels at the faith of this soldier.

Just as obedience in the military is the key that unlocks great military power, so obedience to faith unlocks an even greater power in those who follow the Way of Jesus Christ.

So the question becomes: what is it that Christians are to obey?

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

A good starting point is to look at what got Jesus talking about a smidgen of faith in the first place.

It's in the two lines spoken in the gospel just before today's reading kicks in.

Here it is:

“Jesus said, ‘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 7 times through the day, and 7 times he says, ‘I’m sorry, I won’t do it again,’ forgive him.”

Immediately after Jesus says all of that, the disciples say: “Give us more faith!”, as in, “we can’t possibly forgive like that!”

But Jesus responds by saying, “You have enough faith! “You just need to know how to unlock the power of the faith you already have!”

And the key to that lock is obedience.

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.

It is a matter of just doing it.

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

We obey Jesus when we refuse to engage in revenge.

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

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

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

We obey Jesus 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.

Nowhere does he assure us that it’s always a pleasant experience.

But what he does promise is that if we obey, we will surely unlock the power of that smidgin of faith we each of us have been given as a gift from God, and we will witness, first hand, the power of that unlocked faith, as

-- mountains of anger are reborn into meadows of serenity;

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

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

Jesus pulls us in close today, and with assured confidence lets us in on a truth that is as true as true can be: it is obedience that unlocks the power of faith.

Obedience to the itinerant preacher from Galilee who welcomes all, forgives all, who dies for all.

We are his friends; and he beckons us to follow him along the Way.

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 the 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."

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