

***Through the Eyes of a Slave***  
**A Sermon on Luke 17:5-10**  
**Proper 22**  
**October 6, 2019**

**Introduction**

This is a strange and offensive text to modern ears. Using faith to uproot a large tree and plant it in the sea makes no sense. Expecting no thanks for your service sounds harsh. Being content with being slaves sounds as politically incorrect as it gets today.

This is one of those texts that challenges us. It takes place immediately after Jesus tells the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to the Pharisees. Jesus is now approaching the end of his journey to Jerusalem. He turns to the disciples and teaches them about what life is like in the kingdom of God.

The kingdom is not what we are expecting. The kingdom has a different value system from the world. The kingdom is a place where miracles happen.

**First Move: Faith Like a Mustard Seed Is Enough**

Luke brings together four sayings of Jesus that appear not to have much in common with each other. Today's text includes the third and fourth sayings in that group. The first three sayings also appear in Matthew and Mark. The fourth saying is unique to Luke's gospel.

The first saying is about looking out for the weak in the community. "It would be better for you to tie a millstone around your neck and throw yourself in the sea than to cause one of the little ones to stumble." The second saying is even more demanding. "If a disciple sins against you, even as much as seven times a day, you should forgive the disciple seven times." That sounds impossible. Forgiving once is hard enough today.

Our text today begins with the third saying. It is a request by the apostles. Luke uses the terms apostles and disciples interchangeably. The apostles ask Jesus, "Add faith to us." This request can be interpreted several ways. They may be asking for more faith as a way of giving them strength to meet the demands of the first two sayings. Or they may see Jesus' faith as giving him the power of God. Jesus is described in the gospels as having power over nature. It is a reflection of God's power

over creation. The apostles want this same power to do miracles. It will increase their status in the eyes of others.

This is an anthropocentric view that gives us problems today if we think of ourselves as masters over nature instead of stewards who care for creation. Many of us are concerned that it will truly take a miracle to control climate change in the next generation.

Jesus praises the power of faith, but his response is ambiguous as to the faith of the apostles. “If you have faith like a seed of a mustard plant, you would say to the sycamore tree, ‘Be uprooted and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” A sycamore tree could be 60 feet tall. A sycamore was the same kind of tree that Zaccheus climbed up in.

Jesus may be rebuking the apostles for having faith that is smaller than a mustard seed. Or he could be telling them that it is not the quantity of faith that is important; the quality of faith is what matters. Or he could be opening their eyes to the power of faith that already lies within them. The apostles may already have sufficient faith to work miracles. A sycamore was a large tree. Faith gives the apostles the power to uproot a tree and plant it in the sea.

In Matthew’s version of this saying, Jesus tells the disciples that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains, that nothing is impossible with faith.

Luke’s version may be closer to the original saying of Jesus. Planting a tree in the sea is a strange image. It sounds like a mixed metaphor. It may be a way of saying that God’s ways are mysterious and faith will give us powers that we don’t understand. To have faith is to enter into God’s domain, where anything is possible.

## **Second Move: Changing Our Perspective**

The fourth saying is traditionally called the Parable of the Worthless Slave. It is unique to the Gospel of Luke.

Luke often talks about the relationship between masters and slaves. Slavery was common and accepted in the first century. It is different from the generational slavery in America that was based on race. Slavery in the ancient world usually was based on debts. Poor landowners sometimes sold their children into slavery for a term of years to pay their debts so they could keep their land. Sometimes they were taken themselves into slavery to work off their debts. At the end of the term of years, the debt was paid and the slave was free.

Some people suggest that we no longer use the word slave; it carries too much baggage. The Greek word δούλος can also be translated as servant, but servant

softens it too much. Servant is an honored position in the church today. It would have been offensive in the first century to tell people to think of themselves as slaves. We have to bear with the offensive example of being content with being slaves to try to understand what Luke's Jesus is getting at.

Jesus asks the disciples to identify with the master in the parable. He asks, "Who among you, who has a slave?" By now, we are used to parables beginning with a question.

The master is not wealthy. He only has one slave who does everything for him. The slave works in the fields during the day, then comes into the house to prepare an evening meal for the master. The parable suggests that it would be unthinkable in that culture for you as a master to invite a slave to come beside you and rest. The master would rightfully expect the slave to prepare a meal for the master and not eat himself until the master was finished.

The master tells the slave to put on his apron, according to the NRSV translation. You can guess what the Greek actually says: Gird yourself. Then *deacon* me while I eat and drink. Deacon is a kingdom word. In Luke's version of the Last Supper, Jesus tells the disciples that the rulers of the Gentiles like to lord it over others. Controlling others is the mark of the great ones in that culture. But not so with you. The greatest among you will be deacon of all.

The Greek word, διακονέω, means to be a table servant. It was menial work. The culture believed that only women and slaves were fit to deacon.

The ancient near Eastern culture believed that honor was the highest value. They valued honor like we value money. Jesus tells the disciples not to get caught up in the lust for honor. The kingdom has different values. Accept your place in the honor-and-shame society. There is a great reversal of values in the kingdom. The greatest of all is the one who deacons.

The reversal of values is reflected in the last line of the text. Jesus tells the disciples now to identify with the slave instead of with the master. "When you doing all the things your are ordered to do," expect no thanks.

The last line is difficult. The NRSV translates it as, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done." Worthless is a figurative translation of the Greek word, ἀχρεῖος. It is usually used in an economic context. It means without profit or without value. In the parable it could also mean, "We are slaves who are owed nothing or who have no debts. What we were indebted to do, we have done." To translate it as worthless slaves reflects a later theology that sees all humanity as sinful after the Fall. That is unlikely to be Jesus' intent. Jesus tends to see

the worth in people and to build them up instead of calling them worthless and depraved.

However it is translated, the gist is, don't take an attitude of merit and achievement with God. If you do what God expects, or what is expected of you in the kingdom, don't get puffed up about it. Show a little humility. You are just doing your duty.

If that is the punchline in the parable, it colors how we interpret the third saying. When the disciples say, "Add to our faith," Jesus may be inferring that they want more faith because of the status that having the power to work miracles will bring them.

### **Third Move: Miracles Through Faith**

Jesus tells us instead to look at the world through the eyes of a slave. The parable speaks only about the master's desires; it says nothing about what the slave might want or expect.

Commentators caution that this text can be offensive to women. Throughout history women have had to submit their wishes to men's desires. The text also can be destructive to those who have a negative self-image.

Keeping that in mind, we should not let this text affect our self worth. Each of us knows that our core identity is as a beloved child of God. We don't need honor and we don't seek it; we seek service instead. We choose to let go of the privilege of the master and stand in solidarity with the least of these, whoever they are.

Looking at the world through the eyes of a slave fundamentally changes our attitude. We don't expect to be congratulated for the good work we do. Service is part of the job description of a disciple. Our faith is not something to be praised for; our faith enables God to work miracles through us.

We don't expect recognition for being the first Open and Affirming congregation among Disciples churches in the Oklahoma City area. We are Disciples with a big D and a little D. We do it out of our commitment to discipleship, not out of a desire for glory. Yet we did perform the first same-sex wedding in Edmond. Gay people came here from all over Oklahoma to get married. Mary and I have performed more same-sex weddings than straight weddings. We held the first ordination of a gay woman here when other Disciples churches would not. Sarah's ordination was held during Pam Holt's first week as Regional Minister. She was counseled by other regional ministers to let one of the assistant regional ministers preside. It was too controversial. She had the faith to do it anyway. It was a beautiful, uplifting service. This week half a dozen churches in Edmond are participating in an ecumenical

worship service for Edmond Pride. That would have seemed unimaginable seven years ago.

The head of the Federal Public Defender's office in Oklahoma City recently gave me the name of another prisoner on death row who would be helped by having someone write letters to him. We had our monthly board meeting this week for the Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. I asked for a volunteer, and there was a long silence. There were no takers. I get a different response at this church. Sandy volunteered last week, even though she is already writing to two other inmates. We have half a dozen volunteers writing letters in this congregation; the Coalition has one. We do it out of our commitment to discipleship.

When Mary asked all Disciples churches in Oklahoma to contribute clothing to children in detention centers on the border, she asked for volunteers from several churches to help her sort the clothes. Only two people from other churches helped, but four of you spent a Sunday afternoon sorting clothes.

A few Disciples churches have closed when the attendance dropped to 40. Some of them had larger buildings than we do with higher utility bills. Rick Morse from New Beginnings in Indianapolis came to us last year and evaluated our congregation. He said that the giving is strong for a church our size. We have been able to survive when our attendance dropped the last three years.

Miracles don't happen much in the sanctuary of mainline Protestant churches. Yet our faith allows us to do great things. We have a lot of disciples (with a small D) for a church our size.

It doesn't look like our call is to be a big church on the road. Our call appears to be a brave little church that stands with the LGBT folks, the prisoners and the refugees.

## **Conclusion**

We do seem like a mustard seed sometimes. It would be nice if we could start growing into a bush large enough for the birds of the sky to nest in our branches. We have faith that our visioning process will help with that, that selling part of our land will allow us to do some things to increase our visibility from the road. We will continue our ministry to the outcast and take new steps in faith to reach out to our community.

We are not asking Jesus to add to our faith so that we can do great things. We are hoping that our faith will allow us to witness to a God who has done great things throughout history. We have faith that God will continue to do great things among us.

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