

Trinity Lutheran Church
Luke 17:5-10
October 2, 2016

“Lord, increase our faith!” What a way to start a text. Actually, these words seem rather strange when you consider an earlier faith event of the disciples. Jesus had sent the disciples out with power over demons and diseases. They preached and healed. They went about without any supplies of their own. They had faith to trust God for their necessities. They had faith to proclaim the coming Kingdom of God.ⁱ After the successful mission trip with their spirits high and joys of success, the disciples turn to Jesus and requested, “Lord, increase our faith!” What had changed?

In order to understand their request, we need to consider the four verses spoken by Jesus before the request. Jesus said, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I Repent,’ you must forgive.”ⁱⁱ

Here Jesus addresses the issues of causing people to stumble and the need for forgiving. It is Jesus’ words about forgiveness which precipitates the apostles’ petition for more faith. They seemed to understand forgiveness must be granted by faith. They also appear to believe that such forgiveness would require more faith than they thought they possessed. For they realized causing people to stumble is such an easy thing to do, even when it is not done intentionally. But it can happen in an unknown moment.

I remember clearly the Sunday in January when the congregation, Bethany Lutheran Church in Lake City, MN, was singing the hymn, “I know that my redeemer lives.” In the bulletin, it said to sing verses 1 and 2, 7 and 8. On the hymn board there was just the hymn number. This congregation sang bolding the first two verses then the confusion began. Some sang verse 3 and some sang 7. Hardly a sound was heard for verse 8. In my foolishness, I got up in the pulpit and chew them out for singing so poorly. You can believe, I got negative comments from multiple members as they left worship that morning.

I realized how my comments were a stumbling block for the members of the church. What I had said was inappropriate. So the next Sunday, I started my sermon with an apology for my behavior and inappropriate words of the week before. Again, there were many comments as people left. The one I remember most clearly came from Albert Stehr, who was around 80 years old. He said, “Pastor your apology is accepted and forgiveness is given.”

I think the disciples asked for more faith because they understood how hard it is to forgive. For going out and preaching and healing others is an easy thing to do. It is an act of doing the Christian faith. It is the action of living ones faith in love. Forgiving is an entirely different matter. Forgiveness starts from within. It is dealing with one own feelings and thoughts. It is letting go of being offended. The disciples realized how hard this is to do.

There once was a merchant out in the Midwest who had identical twin sons. The boys' lives became inseparably intertwined. From the first they dressed alike, went to the same school, and did all the same things. In fact, they were so close that neither ever married, but they came back and took over the running of the family business when their father died. Their relationship to each other was pointed to as a model of creative collaboration.

One morning a customer came into the store and made a small purchase. The brother who waited on him put the dollar bill on top of the cash register and walked to the front door with the man. Sometime later he remembered what he had done, but when he went to the cash register, he found the dollar gone. He asked his brother if he had seen the bill and put it into the register, and the brother replied that he knew nothing of the bill in question.

"That's funny," said the other, "I distinctly remember placing the bill here on the register, and no one else has been in the store since then."

Had the matter been dropped at that point – a mystery involving a tiny amount of money – nothing would have come of it. However, an hour later, this time with a noticeable hint of suspicion in his voice, the brother asked again. "Are you sure you didn't see that dollar bill and put it into the register?" The other brother was quick to catch the note of accusation, and flared back in defensive anger.

This was the beginning of the first serious breach of trust that had ever come between these two. It grew wider and wider. Every time they tried to discuss the issue, new charges and countercharges got mixed into the brew, until finally things got so bad that they were forced to dissolve their partnership. They ran a partition down the middle of their father's store and turned what had once been a harmonious partnership into an angry competition.

Then one day a car with an out-of-state license drove up in front of the store. A well-dressed man got out and went into one of the sides and inquired how long the merchant had been in business in that location. When he found that it was over twenty years, the stranger said, "Then you are the one with whom I must settle an old score."

"Some twenty years ago," he said, "I was out of work, drifting from place to place, and I happened to get off a box car in your town. I had absolutely no money and had not eaten for three days. As I was walking down the alley behind your store, I looked in and saw a dollar bill on the top of the cash register. Everyone else was in the front of the store. I had been raised in a Christian home and I had never before in all my life stolen anything, but that morning I was so hungry I gave in to the temptation, slipped through the door and took that dollar bill. That act has weighed on my conscience ever since, and I finally decided that I would never be at peace until I came back and faced up to that old sin and made amends. Would you let me now replace that money and pay you whatever is appropriate for damages?"

At that point the stranger was surprised to see the old man standing in front of him shaking his head in dismay and beginning to weep. When he had gotten control of himself, he took the stranger by the arm and said, "I want you to go next door and repeat the same story you have just told me." The stranger did it, only this time there were two old men who looked remarkably alike, both weeping uncontrollably.ⁱⁱⁱ

Who benefits most from forgiving? I think that it is the forgiver who benefits most. Holding grudges, living with resentments, can eat away at one's life. The desire to get even can consume all of one's energy. Forgiveness means "letting go" of all of that from one's life. Forgiving others doesn't undo the damage they might have done. Forgiving others doesn't proclaim that that what they did was all right. Sin is wrong. Forgiving it doesn't turn it into a right. Forgiving others means that one will no longer let the past damage continue to control one's own life in the present. It means giving up all hope of trying to change the past. It means living a new life in the present.^{iv}

This week I read a prayer which said, "O God, I don't pray for enough faith to move mountains. I can get enough dynamite and bulldozers to do that. What I need and ask for is enough faith to move me."

It is my prayer that as you live this next week, you will find you have the faith needed to live each day fully. Amen

ⁱ Brian P Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes at Cross Marks Christian resources

ⁱⁱ Luke 17:1-4

ⁱⁱⁱ John R. Claypool, The Preaching Event, Word, 1980 p. 37-40.

^{iv} Brian P Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes at Cross Marks Christian resources