

Luke 17: 5-10 Some Expectations for the Small and Lowly

Sometimes as we read Scriptures we forget that what we have received was not recorded at the time but spread as the Good News from person to person. The narrative accounts were written down beginning about thirty years after the events. There were no microphones there when Jesus was talking to the crowds or speaking to the disciples. So we have no way of knowing how closely woven together those interactions were in the moment. Each of the gospel writers had an audience—and these audiences came from different backgrounds. But this morning I would like for us to consider this passage as if was spoken directly following an extended conversation that Jesus had with that mixed audience. Consider that we come to today's passage at the end of a transcript. Some of what was recorded came from what was directed toward the Pharisees and illustrated the ways Jesus offended them, and the ways they offended Jesus. But there were items which we are told were directed to and for the disciples—things which told them Jesus' expectations for them. Jesus, ever since he set his face to Jerusalem has been challenging their understanding of his mission and what it will require of them pretty hard. He gives them a different view of just a neighbor is. He has harsh words for those in power, who have wealth—and tells them they cannot serve God and wealth. And that chasm between those who serve wealth and those who serve God is fixed and frightening. In the kingdom they are to proclaim the world is turned upside down. A verse which just precedes our text this morning is an example of this--17:1-2 reads this way, "Jesus said to his disciples, '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.'" These words also appear in a different setting in Matthew's account, but in both cases these words appear to be a warning. What they are called to do is not going to be easy. But Jesus tells the disciples that within their community caring for one another is to be central. When someone offends, the offense is to be addressed, then the order of the day is going to be repentance and forgiveness—and then forgiveness when wronged even if the offender does not repent. Hearing all the admonishments is it any wonder that those who had chosen to follow him voiced their plea for increased faith. It seems that they are overwhelmed by Jesus' expectations of them. It is important to note that within the first five verses of chapter 17 that these men have gone from being disciples, those who followed a teacher to apostles, those who are sent out. They sense they are being sent out on a mission and doubt their ability to succeed. Those with whom Jesus has been contending are the learned men of the faith, the leaders of the synagogue, the teachers of the Torah. Those who have been called by Jesus are fishermen, tax collectors and others whose livelihood has been based on totally different skills. The discipleship they are being called to is painful, it shatters all the expectations for relationships and behavior—it will be demanding of them. So it seems reasonable that they would feel the need to be better equipped than they believe they are. "Increase our faith", they cry out. The two responses that Jesus gives to this plea seem unfeeling and even harsh to us. On first reading the comparison of their faith to something as small as a mustard seed seems to unkind because a mustard seed is tiny. Like many girls, I received a necklace when I was about 10 which had a mustard seed encased in a marble sized piece of glass. This magnified the mustard seed which it contained,

but even there it appeared very small. This comparison seems to rebuke them for the small amount of faith they have. But perhaps Jesus is telling them something else. Perhaps the message is that no matter how small they believe their faith is—or even how tiny it actually is—even that small amount is capable of powerful things—things more powerful than they can imagine. Jesus tells them even a small amount of faith could uproot a mulberry tree, a shrub which was so many times larger than the seed and plant it in the sea. That even the small amount of faith they possess would make something impossible like uprooting a tree and ridiculous like planting a tree in the sea into the achievable through the power available in that small amount of faith which they have. Jesus has proclaimed a new way of being in relationship with others...a way that runs counter to the rules expounded by the religious establishment of his day...a way of service to God above the things we possess. The things he asked of his disciples were not something that had not been revealed by God before...to care for the widow, the orphan and the resident alien living among them were clearly stated in the first teachings—the Torah. Along the way as the prophets of previous centuries had pointed out...the people had failed to follow through on this way of being in community. Jesus is telling those he is sending out with this message that they will be empowered by the faith they have to answer the call—to proclaim the Good News and to change the world. When we look around our world, it is easy for us to see the failures of our day. It is also easy for us to feel overwhelmed and powerless. It is easier to accept that feeling than to take our faith and trust in God and challenge the systems of prejudice and injustice. Feeling that we cannot effect great change we do not take action. There is this little phrase that we have available to us which can change our approach. Whenever we see a wrong, we can try to make a difference and keeping in mind these words, we can apply ourselves to the wrong. I will make a difference, with God's help. With God's help, I will look at others as God's children no matter their current status. With God's help, I will not support things that do not respect or give dignity to all of God's creation. With God's help, I will seek to confront the fear and prejudice in my own heart so that I may be the loving person that God intended me to be. With God's help...That is a source of power which can indeed uproot many things and replant them in the strangest places. I may not be rich or famous, I may indeed be small and lowly in the great scheme of things, but I can use the strength of my faith to say and do the things pleasing to my Lord. If you are familiar with the writings of Tolkien and the Trilogy of the Rings, you know that the ring of power was destroyed because of Hobbits—the little people of Middle Earth. Elves, dwarfs, and men were part of the Fellowship of the Ring, but it was left to the Hobbit, to see the task completed. I probably will not see a cosmic change in the way the world conducts its business by what I do, but with God's help, I can be a voice that spreads the news—the Good news—that God is present with us and God's ways are those which we are called to live into. Where that message takes root is in God's hands. Thanks be to God. Amen.