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The Gospel of Luke
LVII. Increase Our Faith
Luke 17:1-19

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Back in the halcyon days of my youth, the local Baptist church started a campaign called, “Jesus Is the Answer.” Maybe it was a national movement – I don’t know. What I do know is that all of a sudden many cars were suddenly bearing a new bumper-sticker reading, “Jesus Is the Answer.” Although I did see one car with a bumper-sticker reading, “What’s the Question?” Well, Jesus is truly the answer, the Answer to life and to our part in it. And when He says to us something like, “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*”¹ – that is a real promise, a new reality for us to be able to enter into in these often exhausting and scattershot lives of ours.

Complications, however, set in when we begin to take seriously the very next verse. “*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*” – but, immediately following, “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.*”² In other words, a major part of what it means for us to enter into that Jesus rest is that we begin to allow Jesus to reshape and reorient how we live in this world. The “peace of Christ” is not an emollient we pour over our lives to make them smoother and easier as they are, without having to make any changes.³ Rather, the “peace of Christ” is Christ completely altering our lives so that they begin to come into alignment with His Word and His Will, so that we begin living in the way we were always supposed to. That’s what it means to take His yoke upon us. So, Jesus truly is the Answer we are looking for, the Answer that we so desperately need. But having Jesus as the Answer can also complicate our daily living as we struggle to place our misshapen lives beneath His perfect and peaceful yoke.

For example, just a few weeks ago Jesus was talking to us about our money – how we relate to it and how we use it.⁴ And what He said, you remember, was not easy for us to hear. That we ought not to be slaves to our money or to the making of money; that we ought not consider money to be as important to our happiness as most of us actually do. And He said we are to use our money in ways which glorify Him and serve others. Complicating things, in other words – because we love our money, or at least wish we had a lot more of it to love.

And complicating things is what Jesus is doing to us again this morning. He starts out by saying, “*Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come!*” He is telling us that we must not be a stumbling block to others – not the cause of others tripping and falling. The implication being not just that obvious meaning, but also a deeper one – namely, that we are, contrary to Cain in the Cain and Abel story, that we are our brother’s and sister’s keeper.⁵ That we have an active and ongoing responsibility to one another, and to all the neighbors Jesus

commands us to love – a responsibility not to cause them to sin or to suffer, but also to look out for them, to take an active interest in their well-being where we can.

And that’s not easy. It is a complicating factor in this individualistic culture of ours. It is a complicating factor in the selfish drama we call “Me, Myself, and I” that we have been taught to live out in this world – carefully curated on TikTok and Instagram, of course. It’s a complication to find that Jesus wants us to yield up our unfettered self-pursuit in order to involve ourselves in the care and concerns of other persons. And were that not complication enough, how many of us can claim to be perfect – or even just pretty good – in playing out our parts as parent or child, husband or wife, brother or sister, friend or family? Anyone here mastered the art of personal relationships? The truth is that we, at best, tend to stumble, bumble, and fumble our way through our relationships daily. And that does not even begin to tally up the hurt we accidentally, or sometimes even intentionally, bring upon others. And Jesus is telling us it’s not good enough – He wants better from us. He said it straight out at the Last Supper – that He expects us to love one another as He has first loved us!⁶ And that’s a pretty high bar to set!

And were that not enough of a complication, how about the next thing He says? He says, *“If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”* I want to be sure we heard that correctly. Jesus is saying that if someone does something to hurt us – *“sins against you”*—then we have to be the one to go to that person and repair the relationship. If someone hurts us, we have to swallow that hurt, as well as all sense of “fairness,” and go to that person to try to make it right. And “rebuke him” does not mean “get in his face and tell him off” – it means to open an honest conversation in which the hurt can be acknowledged and overcome, and the relationship restored. When someone wrongs us, we are not allowed to ghost them, to say or to post ugly things behind their back. We’re not even allowed to hurt them as they have first hurt us. Instead, says Jesus, we are to go to that person and try to make things right again. How about that for a life complication?

So I am with the disciples – I understand exactly what they are saying when they respond to these two teachings by crying out, *“Increase our faith!”* That’s a religious way of saying, “This is impossible – no way we can ever do this.” Perhaps even, “You have got to be kidding!” *“Increase our faith”* – I understand why they say this and what it means. How are we ever going to be able to do these sorts of Jesus-yoke wearing things?

What I don’t immediately understand is what Jesus says in response: *“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”* First is this business of mulberry trees being planted in the sea – picture a row of mulberry trees growing about a mile offshore of Myrtle Beach. Actually, I googled this, and there is a patent for growing mulberry trees hydroponically – but that’s not Jesus’ point. The confusing thing here is actually what He says about faith – that if we only had as much faith as a tiny, tiny mustard seed, then we could do what He here commands. We could indeed be our brother’s and sister’s keeper, even forgive the one who hurts us. But we do struggle to do these things – so what does that struggle say about the size of our faith? And what does all of this say about the nature of faith itself?

Fortunately, Jesus doesn't leave us hanging here in our confusion and, apparently, less than mustard seed-sized faith. He explains. First, He tells that story about a servant not expecting a reward from his or her master just for doing his or her ordinary job. There are a lot of ways to take that story – but what I think Jesus is telling us here is what faith is not. Faith is not something we produce in ourselves, something for us to accomplish and so become proud of – “Just look at the size of my faith!” That faith – mustard seed-sized or not – is also not a transaction we exact from God, wherein we produce the faith and He, as a reward, gives us the goods. Faith is not our accomplishment, our possession, nor our effort or offering. Don't go to God, like that servant, expecting a big reward just because we have faith.

So what then is faith? What are we really asking for if we are asking Jesus to increase our faith, so that we can do what He has called us to do?

He tells us. Thankfully, He tells us. Faith is – relationship. Faith is simply a real, ongoing, ever-deepening relationship between Him and us. That's what faith is – it's Him and us and us and Him together, in a real, living, daily, deepening relationship marked by trust and love. Our praying to Him, and He abiding in us. Our studying His Word, and He through His Holy Spirit enabling us to understand it and to put it into practice – practice being the operative word. Our worshiping Him, and He filling us with a truer sense of the greatness of His glory. Faith is not something we possess in and of ourselves; it is a relationship we enter into with Him, daily. Faith is not our accomplishment – you know, scrunching up our eyes and believing in Him with all our might; it is opening our eyes to the truth that He is with us always, and that we can – really – talk to Him and walk with Him daily. Just like the beloved old hymn says, walk with Him and talk with Him, while He tells us that we are His own. Faith is that relationship – not a system of beliefs or a religious code of ethics. Faith is simply Jesus and us, us and Jesus – in daily, living, deepening personal relationship.

That's what I think we are meant to take from the next story, the story of the ten lepers. I know that this story is nearly always interpreted as being about gratitude – and that's not a bad reading, nor a bad lesson. But look at two things in this story. The first is that the nine lepers don't actually do anything wrong. Jesus did not say to them, “Go, and show yourselves to the priest – but be sure to stop partway along and run back to me and express thanksgiving.” No, the nine are doing exactly what Jesus commands them to do. And then notice this second thing, what Jesus says to the tenth leper when he does return to thank Jesus. Jesus does not say to him, “Rise and go your way; your gratitude has made you well.” Rather He says, “*Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well.*” What Jesus celebrates and blesses in the tenth healed leper is not his gratitude, but his faith. So what is the faith of the leper which Jesus commends, but which the other nine lack?

Here's what I think. The nine go off to show themselves to the priest, just as Jesus tells them. But they don't turn around and rush back to Jesus when they are healed along the way. Why? Because they have gotten what they wanted from Jesus – and, as far as they are concerned, the deal is done. Or, to put it another way, in getting healed, they have gotten all the Jesus they want. They see no need for, they feel no desire for, any more of Jesus than this healing that He has given them. They remind me of a poem by Wilbur Rees, harkening back to the days when you would pull into a gas station and tell the attendant to put three dollars' worth of gas in the car:

*I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.
 Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,
 but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk
 or a snooze in the sunshine.
 I don't want enough of God to make me love a black man
 or pick beets with a migrant.
 I want ecstasy, not transformation.
 I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth.
 I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack.
 I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please.*

That's the failing of the nine – not ingratitude, so much as the fact that they have already gotten all the Jesus they want when He heals them. They had gotten their three dollars' worth of Jesus, and they wanted to leave it at that. Avoid any further entanglements or, shall we say, complications.

But not the tenth healed leper. When he realizes he is healed, he is no doubt joyful like the other nine. But somewhere in his soul a spark is struck. A small ember which compels him to turn and go back to Jesus. A small, but growing fire within him, awakening him to the possibility that there is something before him even greater than being healed – and that this something greater is this Someone who healed him. He turns around because, having been healed by Jesus, He now wants more of Jesus, much more. He wants to be closer to this Love which has now touched him, this Grace which has now cleansed him, the Healer who has now worked His power and peace within him. He turns back because he is grateful, yes – but even more because he wants more of Jesus. He now wants – not just something from Jesus – He wants Jesus Himself. He runs back to Jesus and falls at His feet worshipping Him. Seeking deeper connection to Him. Faith, in other words. Relationship, in other words. Faith not as something we possess – but as this connection to, this relationship with, this wanting more than three dollars' worth of the One who is our Healer, our Savior, our Maker, and our Friend.

And, if this is faith, then let us see also that it is out of this relationship of faith that the impossible, complicating things Jesus asks of us become genuinely possible – and not only possible, but part of the uncomplicating of our lives which is our learning to live the way we were always supposed to live under God's heaven. This way of living which actually works, this wearing the yoke of the Jesus life. How does it happen?

Well, think for just a moment of the two things Jesus asked of us this morning – caring for our brothers and sisters, and seeking out reconciliation with those who have wronged us. Are not those precisely what Jesus came to this earth to do for us? He didn't sit up in heaven and just ignore our stumbling, bumbling, and fumbling of our way through life – He came down from heaven and got personally involved in helping us not have to live that way anymore. And He didn't have to do it – but He chose to love us and to help us from up close and personal. He came down to us, in love, so that we wouldn't have to stumble and bumble our way blindly through life anymore.

And, as for being the one to seek out and initiate reconciliation with the ones who have hurt us – well, isn't that precisely what He did towards us who had hurt Him by our sin? What He did towards us upon the cross? The cross where He chose to show mercy towards us, before even we had thought to repent of our sin. Came to show mercy towards us, fix the relationship between us and Him – so that nothing would ever again come between us and Him, Him and us. So that nothing would ever again stand in the way of that relationship which is faith.

So here's the explanation of how even a mustard seed-sized faith can be sufficient to accomplish the impossible, complicating things Jesus asks of us. He has done all those things already – for us and in relation to us. So if we will just stay close to Him, walk with Him, talk with Him, always seeking more of Him – in other words, be in even a mustard seed-sized relationship with Him daily, then He will be able to teach us how to do what He calls us to do. He will be able to empower us to do what He calls us to do. He will be able to work in us, change us, in order to make His yoke well-fitting upon our shoulders – so that we are living continually with His presence, into His peace, accompanied by His joy.

Faith is a relationship – it's Him and us, and us and Him, daily. And it's not the size of our belief in Him which matters. Rather it's the size of the One in whom we believe, in whom we now live and move and have our being. So, indeed, *"Lord, increase our faith!"* Help us always to want more of You.

¹ Matthew 11:28.

² Matthew 11:29.

³ John 14:27.

⁴ Luke 16:1-15.

⁵ Genesis 4:9.

⁶ John 13:34-35.