

One of the little skills worth learning when you are reading the gospels is to notice the movements: to notice where Jesus is and to whom he is speaking. In the sixteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is sparring with the Pharisees about how "love of money" is corrosive to the human heart. It's one of many conflicts with that group.

But in the seventeenth chapter, he turns back to the disciples, who have been listening and watching all of this unfold. It's a small gesture but it's significant: these words are addressed to the Church. In those few verses immediately before today's gospel reading, Jesus says that "occasions of stumbling are bound to come." We will not, in other words, always get it right. Perfectionism is not the path to the Kingdom of God. In fact it may be the case that perfectionism is an enemy of spiritual growth. So Jesus begins with the premise that the Church as a community, and we as individual Christians, will make lots of mistakes.

That is very good news! As long as we hear what comes next: that in response we are not about collecting grudges, but forgiveness. If someone hurts you, you aren't supposed to allow that wound to fester. You are supposed to take responsibility for claiming those feelings; to go and confront that person directly so that they can say they are sorry, and then you can let it go. *Rebuke, repentance, and forgiveness* is meant to become a recognizable Christian pattern—a way of life. How many times? Jesus says that even if a person comes to you seven times *in one day* to repent, then you *must* forgive them.

*And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"* That's where we began today—they seem to be responding to Jesus' challenge by saying, "look Jesus, it is hard enough to forgive someone once in a day." If we are going to take you seriously here, then we will need a lot more faith than we've got right now. So it seems like a very reasonable, and humble, and sincere request. But how does Jesus respond? As he often does, he says the apostles have gotten it all wrong. We are used to hearing this phrase but consider it anew. He says: *If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.*

Faith isn't a commodity. It isn't *more* of it that we need, it's finding the courage to put into practice the faith given to us—even if it's only a tiny bit. Think about that for a moment. We sometimes act like the disciples, as if we need to keep journeying along until we grow into the faith of a St. Francis or a St. Clare. If we get as much faith as they had then we can become "instruments of peace." In the meantime we muddle along. But I think Jesus is directly challenging that assumption. He is inviting us to "go with what we got" by putting the faith we have into practice and then watching what happens. There is a blessing at the end of Morning Prayer, a verse from the third chapter of Ephesians, that says:

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

I think that gets at the same truth Jesus is talking about here. Faith is about trusting that God can and is *already* working through us—and that even a tiny spark or seed of God's presence can make the whole world new.

I was listening to NPR this week on my way home from a meeting in Springfield, to a story about the Amish Community in Pennsylvania, one year after the tragic shootings there.

(<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14900930>)

I knew that that community had publicly forgiven the murderer, but I had missed that they had also attended the man's funeral in order to offer prayers for the murder's widow and children. And then they set up an educational fund for the man's children. It's an amazing witness.

There were two things that resonated with me in that story on NPR: one is that it made clear that for the Amish, forgiveness is a community matter. We tend to feel more isolated, more on our own, when we face a hard one in terms of forgiveness. But the story made it clear that this is simply the expectation for the Amish: it became very public a year ago because of that tragedy but they've cultivated it and worked at it for a long time now.

But the second thing was that they were talking with an Amish therapist who said not to confuse forgiveness with healing. There is still a great deal of pain that is being worked through, he said. It has not been easy. It's just that there is clarity that you never move on if all your energy is focused on anger and vengeance. You forgive in order to begin that process of moving on.

That all makes sense to me, even if it is hard. But the point in this context, I think, is that that Amish community doesn't necessarily have *more* faith than we do; in fact if we say it that way it lets us off the hook. So Jesus pushes us back on that. He says if you have God working in your life you can already do infinitely more than you can ask or imagine. That if you practice dealing with conflict by trusting in reconciliation then you only need a tiny bit of faith. The key is that you put that little bit into practice, and trust it to be enough to make a big difference.

Now I am sometimes critical of the lectionary for cutting texts too short but today is one of those days I feel they kept going too far. I think these two verses from Luke 17:5-6 are enough to spend a lifetime working on, let alone one sermon. The image that follows about slaves and their masters is in a sense another sermon altogether. But it's an odd metaphor, one that we need to unpack a little bit at least, so I don't want to stop quite yet.

*Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'*

These words are still addressed to the apostles—to those engaged in ministry, to us. The scholars notice the code-language of the slave who *plows*, *tends* the sheep, and then *serves* at table. These are all images for what ministry is about: plowing, tending, serving. The story is actually pretty

straightforward if you can get past the practices of first-century slavery. Jesus invites us to see ourselves as among the privileged: we are the slave owners. If you have someone who is expected to plow the field, and tend the sheep, and then come in and serve you your dinner, you don't interrupt that flow by saying, "there, there...you've worked hard today in the field, let me cook *you* some dinner and why don't you put your feet up on the chair and I'll fix you a very dry martini?" The slave has a job description and that is their job; *you* are supposed to be the guy in the chair sipping the martini. Right?

Then Jesus turns the tables and says: "look, our relationship to God is the same way—except that God gets the martini." When you do the work of ministry—forgiving others and plowing the fields and tending the sheep and serving at table—well, what do you expect, a parade? That's your job description! That is what the Church is *supposed* to be about, every day of the week. It is the work God has given us to do.

God owes us no great reward for living the lives we have been called to live by virtue of our Baptism. It is not really any big deal—it's just what we are committed to when we said, "I will, with God's help..." Yes, it's hard to be the Church. But the good news I hear in today's gospel reading is that we don't have to sit around waiting for the Kingdom to come, waiting to get more faith, or perfect faith; we just need to put into practice the faith we already have—and let God fill in the gaps.

What would happen if the Amish practices were seen not as *exceptional* but as *normative* for Christians? What would happen if every time someone picked up a newspaper and read an article about the Episcopal Church they were seeing forgiveness and reconciliation being practiced, and the love of God being made manifest. No big deal...just doing our job...just acting on the faith we have, with God's help.