

## ***A Living Faith***

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost; Series C  
Luke 17:1-10

I heard a story once about a certain tomb in Italy. An enormous block of granite was brought and placed there by order of the man who is buried underneath. Before he died he arranged that this great mass of granite should be laid over his tomb; and he did so, saying that he did it in order that if there ever was a resurrection, it might be certain he should never rise! We might laugh at the folly of this kind of thinking. Though, it is an interesting fact that this block of granite weighing well over a ton is there, but it is split in two!

Between the hour of this man's burial and the placing of that block over his grave, a bird flying across carrying an acorn, happened to drop the acorn right there. The granite slab was put in place and if you see it now, that enormous slab of granite weighing well over a ton, is split clean through the middle and the oak tree from the acorn is there, growing straight up through it! The living power in the acorn has split the granite (See G. Campbell Morgan, *Luke*, 195-6).

In our Gospel reading Jesus is having a private conversation with his inner group of twelve disciples and he says, "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" (Luke 17:6). Or, for our purposes this morning, you would be able to say to this slab of granite weighing well over a ton, be split in two, and it would obey you! Faith like a grain of mustard seed.

In our reading Jesus talks to his disciples once again about *how they ought to be and live as his followers*. He calls them to be mindful of their words, thoughts, actions, and deeds. He reminds them that they, like we do today, live in a community of believers with fellow followers, brothers and sisters in Christ. He reminds them that their behavior then has an impact not just upon themselves but upon all of those with whom they are joined. So Jesus says, "Pay attention to yourselves" (Luke 17:3)! Yet, he knows that life as a follower of Christ is hard. It is not easy to live as the people of God according to his will and his ways. How often it is the case that we choose instead to follow our own will and ways, making ourselves the ultimate authority. Jesus knows that it is difficult to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves" (Luke 10:27). Jesus' warning to his disciples in the Gospel reading is still true for us today, "Temptations to sin are sure to come" (Luke 17:1). Unfortunately, opportunities to lead others astray and put stumbling blocks in their path of living as followers of Christ are plenty.

Rather than calling upon the name of our God rightly at all times, especially in times of trouble, disappointment, and hardship, when the finances are tight, the bills too much, or our job is in jeopardy, we may call each other names, or seek to relieve our stress and anxiety through unhealthy outlets or addictions. Rather than turning outside ourselves and trusting our faithful God who promises to provide, preserve, protect, and defend us in all things, we turn within ourselves to find the solution and we end up hurting others. We put a stumbling block in the way of their life of faith and trust in God.

We may put a stumbling block in the way of our children or grandchildren by telling them that Church and the study of God's Word is important but then we stay home, sleep in, do not engage in a prayer life or a devotional life in God's

Word throughout the week. We don't demonstrate and model the importance, perhaps because it takes too much work or is just too unnatural or uncomfortable. And in so doing we may put a stumbling block in the life of faith and trust in God of our children.

We may cause others to stumble in their faith and trust in God when we speak ill of authority figures and others. With our words we may tear down the reputations of parents, politicians, teachers, or church leaders. In so doing we may set the example that God's will for us to honor and respect our authorities and to not give false witness against another is just not that important. In these ways, we may be causing others to stumble in their faith. We may be giving a harmful witness to the Christian faith. We may be leading them down a path where they abandon altogether their trust in our Faithful, triune God who always protects, preserves, provides, and defends us. We may be leading them to trust in something or someone else above all else. Someone or something who has not promised to protect, preserve, provide, and defend, and someone or something that ultimately cannot deliver the protection, preservation, provision, and defense that we need in this life.

And so Jesus suggests repentance and forgiveness. This is Jesus' solution and remedy to the tendency we all have even as Christians to put stumbling blocks in the way of others (Luke 17:3-4). Repentance and forgiveness—it sounds easy, but we know, from experience, that it is difficult to do. Jesus' disciples also recognize that Jesus' prescription of repentance and forgiveness is difficult. This is why they say to him, "Lord, increase our faith" (Luke 17:5)! They say, "Give us more faith!" We cannot do this on our own, we need more faith in God! Elsewhere in Jesus' Ministry a father of a young boy that was in need of physical healing from an illness said something similar to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief" (Mk 9:24)! Jesus responds to his disciples' request for an increase in faith *by pointing them not to the quantity of faith but to the quality of faith.*

Jesus draws their attention to a mustard seed. He doesn't point to the size of the mustard seed but to the quality and potential of it. A mustard seed is great *because* inside of it is life! So also, your faith and trust in God is great, regardless of its size. It is great *because* in that faith is life—the life of Christ and the power of God's Spirit. That is all that is needed. When that life-filled seed of faith is continually nourished through the regular hearing of the Gospel, participation in the life giving Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, a continual life-line of prayer and the daily devotion and study of God's Word, it grows into something great.

Faith like a mustard seed has life in it—powerful life. The life of God himself. The life of Christ. *Nothing is impossible because now forgiveness is possible.* In Christ God has forgiven you and now, through faith and trust in Christ, you can live forgiving others and asking for their forgiveness. Through the life of Christ and the presence of God's Spirit within that seed of faith daily repentance is possible, turning away from what you desire most to turning to what God desires most for you.

You were once separated from God, spiritually dead, not trusting in the one, true God, our triune God. But just like from that acorn came a mighty oak tree powerful enough to split a slab of granite, so also in the watery tomb of your baptism life arose (Romans 6:4-6). Life that is founded and empowered by God in Christ and his Spirit. In the tomb was doubt, and with that doubt was death. But even in the midst of your doubt and looming spiritual death, there was still hope.

There is still hope! With God all things are possible. Life is still able to arise. Even in the soil where death and doubt exists, God can plant a seed of faith. Even in the midst of your life where doubt and struggles cause you to daily give into temptation and cause others to stumble in their faith and trust in God, he has planted a seed of faith.

In your baptism God made a promise to you. He promised to preserve, protect, defend, and provide for you all your life long because he declared you in that moment to be his Holy, beloved, forgiven, redeemed child. And through the water and the Word of promise mixed in with that water, your God planted a seed of faith within the soil of your heart through his Holy Spirit. He made a promise to you and he planted his life in you. Out of spiritual death, God brought life in you through his Son. Where your heart was once captured by another Lord, the Lord of Sin and death, Satan himself and overcome with doubt, your Holy, triune God, stole it away and purchased it back for himself. He filled your heart with fear, love, and trust for him alone. He filled your heart with love for him and for one another. The seed of faith. The seed of trust. It started small, but it is a seed of incredible quality and worth. When it continues to come in contact with the nutrients of the spoken and written word of the Gospel and the Holy Sacraments, it grows into a strong, courageous, bold, mature tree of faith planted in the forest of God's church—planted in the pews of this sanctuary!

The Christian life is a struggle. Jesus knew it, his disciples knew it, that father of the young boy in need of a healing knew it. But the one who has struggled for you by traveling to Jerusalem for you to purchase and win you for himself is faithful to you. Continue then to receive his help, his grace where he offers it—here in the Divine Service, there in the written Word, downstairs in a study of his Word with fellow Christians, at your dining tables and bedsides with table blessings and morning and evening prayers of devotion. God is the one who specializes in “giving life to the dead and bringing into existence things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). He did it once for you and he wants to continue strengthening that life! Amen.