

“A Little Faith”

*The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5).*

Have you ever felt like you were in an impossible situation?

Over the last few weeks I’ve been watching a documentary on World War II and it is filled with stories of people who faced impossible situations. From tortured POW’s on the verge of starvation to Japanese Americans who were banished to relocation camps to families who endured weeks of anxious waiting just to hear if a loved one was dead or alive...the scope of the war touched virtually every family and the circumstances in which they found themselves were often unimaginable. One man who served as a gunner on a B-17 bomber described the overwhelming dread of having to crawl into his position in the cramped ball turret under the plane and fly into German air space with little hope of surviving the mission...and from that era desperate stories like this were repeated time and time again.

As we sit here today in the comfort of this sanctuary, scenarios like these sound impossible to our ears. And yet the truth is that today you are surrounded by people who are also facing impossible situations. They may not be as dramatic as the stories from World War II, but the feelings of anxiety and despair created by these impossible situations are real and they have serious spiritual implications. Today, right here in this room, some of you are facing an illness for which there is no clear end in sight. Today, some of you are weighed down by a marriage that has splintered and is in crisis. Today, some of you are feeling the ache and emptiness of loss as you grieve the death of a loved one. And today, right here in this room, some of you feel completely isolated as you struggle with your own sin or with the sin of another.

In our gospel reading from Luke 17, Jesus acknowledges the inevitable presence of sin. Speaking to His disciples, He says, “Temptations to sin are sure to come...” and if He would’ve stopped there, His words would almost seem comforting in a “misery loves company” kind of way; as if Jesus were commiserating with us...but He doesn’t stay with a sympathetic tone for very long. Without giving His listeners even a second to justify themselves He continues, “...but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin. Pay attention to yourselves!”

These words from Jesus are shocking. What seems to start out as a statement of consolation quickly changes and with sobering words of warning, Jesus has made an inevitable and difficult situation seem impossible! We know from our readings over the last three weeks that the people listening to Jesus in this part of Luke’s gospel had not led good lives. This group of followers had committed public sins and some of them had even padded their own purses at the expense of their neighbors. These were certainly people through whom the temptation to sin had come and they must have been stunned at Jesus’ words.

After a collection of parables in which the grace of God had been proclaimed and the restoration of repentant sinners had been celebrated, it looked like the axe had been dropped. And, if these words weren’t stern enough, He then introduces a situation that challenges even the most righteous among us. “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” (Luke 17:3-4).

It was bad enough that Jesus had pointed the spotlight of judgment on them, but now He had set an outrageous standard for forgiveness. It’s one thing to forgive a person who repents to you – they could understand that – but to forgive someone who continually sins against you? Who takes advantage of you? Who returns to you again and again mocking your mercy? To forgive someone who sins against you seven times...*in a day!*!!

*That* is ridiculous! In fact it's impossible! And when the apostles heard this impossible teaching, they threw up their hands in desperation and said, "Increase our faith!"

Now, before we go any further with this reading, we need to be clear about something. We need to understand that the kind of forgiveness that Jesus is talking about here *is* impossible for us! We like to fashion ourselves as gracious people and we like to think that we take the high road with those who annoy us or even with people who have directly sinned against us and yet so often, our forgiveness is nothing more than a condescending gesture where we exercise power over someone else and, generally speaking, we like this kind of forgiveness. It patches things up and it makes us feel good because it gives us a sense of control over our lives...but what if the pattern repeats? What if the one we've forgiven does it again? Or, what if the sin committed against us is more than we can deal with? Then what do we do? Some of the rabbis in Jesus' day taught that you were obligated to forgive someone three times for the same sin and after that you could then disregard that person as unworthy of mercy. These rules about forgiveness certainly seem reasonable...but this isn't the kind of forgiveness Jesus was talking about.

You see, true forgiveness never comes from inside of us and based on our own standards, it doesn't even make sense to us. We are rotten with sin. We are selfish to the core and, no matter how good our actions may look on the outside, anything we generate from within our hearts is evil – even our so-called forgiveness. The bottom line and the very reason for Jesus' words, is to teach us that on our own, true forgiveness *is* impossible for us and that our worldly idea of forgiveness needs to be shattered. To grasp the truth of Jesus' words, we need a radically redefined understanding of what this word forgiveness really means...and that is where faith comes in!

When faced with an unreasonable and impossible definition of forgiveness the apostles cry out, "Increase our faith" and in answer to this desperate question, Jesus 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." In response to the discouragement of the disciples, Jesus once again delivers a word of grace and He does it by reshaping and reforming their very understanding of faith itself. Their request for Jesus to increase their faith shows their idea of faith as something to be possessed and accumulated; that if they could just get "enough faith" then they could get out of this impossible situation...but Jesus doesn't let them hold to these false ideas.

Instead, He points to a faith that is nothing more than surrendering to the God who gives it. It is not, as the disciples thought, something to be gained or a ribbon to be won, faith is the dependence on God to do the impossible. That is what faith is all about! In Hebrews 11, we are told that, "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." In II Corinthians, Paul describes the people of God as those who, "walk by faith, not by sight" and this kind of trust in the word and promises of God gives us the power to do the impossible and nowhere is that seen more vividly than in the gift of true forgiveness.

We don't forgive because we are gracious; we forgive because we have faith in a gracious God. We don't forgive, because we have been paid back; we forgive because we have faith that our damning sins have been paid for. Saving faith...faith the size of a grain of mustard seed...is faith in what God has done! My friends, we can forgive not because we have great faith, but because we have been given faith in a great God; a God who has accepted us and forgiven us and promised us eternal life.

When we forgive based on what's in our hearts, even our forgiveness can become the kind of stumbling block that causes a little one to sin. But forgiveness that is found and grounded in the cross of Jesus Christ is a forgiveness that can deliver us from an impossible situation. My friends, the Lord has promised us that "with God all things are possible" and with a little faith, you can forgive as you have been forgiven. Go with this peace and do the impossible. Amen.

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