

Extra/Ordinary Calling
Luke 17:5-10

“We are worthless slaves.”

Oh my. When I first read this morning’s Gospel text I had such a “no way – not a chance am I preaching on THAT” reaction, that I just KNEW I’d be challenged with what I call a “Holy Spirit HaHa” moment.

Needless to say, a parable about slavery just doesn’t work for us in 2004. At the time of Luke’s writing, this parable would have appealed to its audience on the basis of commonly known cultural assumptions, but today it wrenches my guts with revulsion. This despite the fact that even many of the poorest men had slaves in that era, and despite the knowledge that Luke’s image of slavery is closer to our understanding of servanthood. No matter: for me, to place God in the role of master and our humble selves in the role of slave is an obsolete and, for me, immoral comparison.

And as we squirm and look around to see who has heard this white woman reading about slavery, we’re perhaps feeling our own urge to cry out as the disciples did: “Jesus, increase our faith” that this book, our Bible, may have a Word of Good News to speak through this difficult passage.

“Increase our faith!”

Now what could have inspired such a request from the disciples? Eight chapters earlier, Luke related that Jesus had sent the twelve out with power over demons and diseases, to preach and to heal. They took nothing with them, but had faith that God would provide. What do they now face that inspires such a sense of inadequacy?

[Well,] Just prior to the lectionary’s given verses in Luke 17, Jesus has been teaching on some ways we ought to live. The chapter begins: “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!...Be on your guard!” The call to live well continues, “If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you 7 times a day and turns back to you 7 times and says, ‘I repent’, you must forgive.”

That’s enough to make any of us take stock: ...Do we have what it takes?

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And so here we are, settled in the pews with a cry for faith and a Biblical image that just doesn’t reflect our experiences closely enough to act as a message of the Good News. How do we move forward, then, to the point of Jesus’ teaching in this passage, if we can’t get past our judgment of the parable?

“What Would Jesus Do?”

He’d tell US a different STORY of course! So let’s try it out.

Place yourself in the picture. You’re the disciples of Luke’s text, just hearing God’s demands on your lives: don’t act in ways that’ll cause others to stumble but be a good role model; speak truth in love to the sinner beside you; forgive and forgive and forgive again.

“But that’s a heavy charge – too much for a regular joe or jane like me, merely human and *prone* to holding a grudge.... Ahhh, but I CAN do it if only... ‘JESUS, INCREASE OUR FAITH!’”

Ohh, now you’ve said it. Obviously that’s the wrong answer, because here comes one of those stories he likes to tell when we’re JUST NOT GETTING IT.

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Who among you, when you are driving down West Prospect Road,
will even notice when the driver in front of you uses her turn signal to change lanes;
and then, when perceiving the red light ahead of her, slows down to a stop BEHIND the crosswalk lines.

Would you not, rather, accept this as the appropriate and courteous thing to do for all driver and pedestrian safety? Does that driver deserve thanks for following the rules of the road? So you also, when you have followed all that I have taught, say: “That’s just what I ought to have done!”

This neo-parable may seem more “light” to our ears because of its very mundane character – and yet so would the original have seemed to Luke’s hearers. First, they would have recognized that the slave was simply following his regular routines for an ordinary day. Second, Luke’s audience didn’t have the social-moral sense of wrong around slavery as we have learned from our nation’s history – so the “ordinariness” of this reinterpretation fits more than we might first think. And so, we can move into Jesus’ teaching via this new vehicle.

(The scene continues: ...)

Increase your faith? Please! You have faith. Faith the size of a mustard seed can move mulberry trees!

(That’s right, Luke said mulberry tree, not mountain).

With faith you could talk a mulberry tree into planting itself in the sea!

<The Sea? A bit unusual, isn’t it Jesus? A tree, growing in the sea?>

Sure it is! And that’s faith. Faith – even the smallest amount – can make things happen that DEFY ORDINARY HUMAN EXPERIENCE: The casting out of demons; the curing of disease. You’ve already done that. It has become commonplace to you, and yet, FAITH IS *EXTRAORDINARY*.

THAT’S NOT WHAT YOU NEED HERE. It’s not faith. To act and to speak and to love and to forgive – to follow my calling for a well-lived life, you need *ordinary_human_experience*.
...Like following the rules of the road.

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Have you ever noticed how sometimes kids just “get” things that adults can’t quite grasp? I’ve seen a little boy in the nursing home recognize an elderly grandparent’s need for some TLC and instinctively reach out to hold her hand – while his mother, in her busyness, pretends not to notice that same need.

Or – and I’m sure many of us have heard this at one time or another – a child flat out asking:
“You’re not supposed to be doing that, are you?”

It’s Jesus’ rules numbers 1 and 2! -- Model God’s love and confront those doing wrong!

If kids can do it instinctively then we as adults have lost something in ourselves. Something that allowed ourselves to *just follow* these everyday rules. And it’s not faith! Jesus is quick to jump in with a story that shows our ordinary workings.

You can do this – he says – not through faith, but just like you turn on the turn signal or step on the brakes.

Jesus’ charge in this text – live well so others see your example, confront evil and sin, forgive when it is asked of you – we’re pretty much used to it, right? Having chosen this path of Christian discipleship, we KNOW how we generally ought to live. But even knowing, we don’t always necessarily want to follow just because we should. Sometimes, it’s even nice to get a thank you – or a little bit of credit for the good we do.

When I was in seminary, I met a young woman who for the first time in her life was in a setting that wasn’t entirely white.

She had grown up in a small town, but she *had* been taught that racism was wrong, and so felt up to the challenge of some small diversity.

She once expressed, though, how she suffered some confusion when in classes with or trying to befriend black students. “Why do they take so long to trust me? Don’t they know I’m not going to speak down to them? I may be white, but I should get some credit for trying!”

She learned to laugh at that initial attitude she took.

But it was a great learning experience:

As whites, do we expect special notice when we DON'T act with racism?

Sometimes we may, but to be inclusive *should be the norm*, not something for which we receive thanks or merit.

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From their response, the disciples seemed to view these rules as nearly impossible to follow. If we're honest, we might just respond as the disciples did, "give us something to make it easier – more PLEASANT for us to do the right thing."

I admit – some days I really struggle with just ignoring, much less forgiving the jerk in the next car. And yet, Jesus' response is clear: the rules of a good life are as ordinary as doing your daily routine, as bending your pinky finger to hit that turn signal.

But this morning's text offers even more. Jesus' message to the disciples through the extraordinary image of faith and mulberry tree and through the ordinary parable of drivers and road rules is more subversive. *It makes us take another look at our comfortable sense of selves as "inadequate" to the task before us, and tells us WE ARE able.*

Jesus believed in the disciples! While they sought more faith Jesus spoke as if they INHERENTLY had the ability to follow his teaching.

A regular driver automatically steps on the brake for a red light. Children instinctively call us out. We, like the disciples, have the ability to act on Jesus' message. Apparently, we just need reminding and prompting ... and REprompting.

So churches re-read these stories week after week, year after year. And so, also, we reinterpret and retell Jesus' parables to make them relevant to our own context.

Jesus believes in *us*!

He shows us that we can do these seemingly difficult good deeds almost *instinctively*.

Ohhh, but wouldn't we LOVE to do the extraordinary!

We strive for faith that allows us to lay healing hands on others, bring comfort where there is none, and trust that God'll provide when we have NOTHING.

Like the disciples we sometimes want to skip right over the ordinary, everyday tasks that are in our abilities ALREADY.

We want to end wars, while the child walking past us to school fights a war against her addictions.

We want to march on Capitol Hill, while members of our own communities aren't even registered to vote.

Moving that mulberry tree is much more glamorous than forgiving your mother's careless words yet again or talking to your brother about his spiritual life. We have that power. And we can do both.

In fact, it is in rooting ourselves in Jesus' everyday rules for a good life that helps us encounter those more complex moments which require some faith.

Stopping before the crosswalk is about paying attention and stepping on the brake.

Living the call that Jesus sets before us is about sharing with others what we have ALREADY been given – *the grace of God*.

This is our extra/ordinary calling. It's not extraordinary like faith – it's beyond ordinary. It's so ordinary it seems unnecessary to repeat. And yet we *need to hear it again*.

Like the repetition of our daily routines or like driving down the road. Alongside our faith we have an *extra/ordinary* calling. And by Jesus' own understanding, we're all up to the task.