

“SERVANTS OF THE SERVANT”

a sermon on Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Ps. 37; 2 Tim. 1:1-14; and Luke 17:5-10
October 2, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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It is traditionally held that the author of Luke’s Gospel (as well as the Book of Acts) is the person we know as “Luke the Physician,” who accompanied the Apostle Paul on his travels. But regardless of who it was (and the book itself doesn’t say), scholars generally hold that the book was written during the last third of the First Century. All of that is important when it comes to interpreting the book. As with most of the Scriptures, it is composed of what were first “oral accounts” of Jesus’ life and ministry that were told and retold – and retold to an increasingly wider and more “diverse” audience as time went on. And *then* someone organized those stories into a narrative and put them down on paper.

And that someone was likely a well-travelled and well-educated individual, who “wove” the accounts together with elements like the poems at the beginning of the book (Mary’s and Zechariah’s “songs,” and others). That conclusion is based in part on the fact that Luke is written using more complex Greek sentence structures than the other Gospels – which is also true of Paul’s writings, by the way, perhaps another indication that its author really *was* the one who was with the Apostle on his travels.

Obviously, today’s Gospel reading presents challenges for us, both in its words that have a very different “cultural context” than ours, and then also in the process of translation, trying to convey in our language what is both explicitly stated but also what is *inferred* or conveyed more “indirectly” because of how it was originally stated.

For those reasons, sermons on this text . . . particularly about what Jesus meant when he talked about having “faith the size of a mustard seed” . . . are *all over the place* in their interpretations.

So first, let’s look back at the context in which he said those words.

This chapter of Luke contains sayings of Jesus that were spoken . . . or *written* . . . not for the present moment in those disciple’s lives, or perhaps not even so much even for *them*, per se. They were words written for the church in the years to come.

And they are words of *realism*; that is, they recognize what the disciples at that moment in time could not *fathom* – which is that after the events of those days had passed, and their “salvation” had been won by what Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to *do*, they were still going to have to *wait* for ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises of fully restored relationships, and completely transformed hearts and minds; that they were going to have to develop a common life together as a community of Christian disciples *waiting* for the Lord’s return.

That, it seems to me, is what Jesus is teaching about in the first verses of chapter 17, and what by the last third of the first Century – when the words were written down – had become *abundantly* clear; that the Church was going to exist and be composed of Christians *not yet* fully re-made in the image of Christ, and therefore in an organization in which all was just sweetness and light – even *in* the church, let alone outside of it.

First of all, it was going to be filled with people at different *places* in their journeys.

Paul’s writings have a good bit to say about that – for example about his personal conviction that eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol didn’t bring him any harm . . . but that since he recognized that doing so might bring harm to someone newer in the faith, he and other with that conviction needed to exercise care in how they “exercise(d) this liberty,” as he put it.

“Occasions for stumbling are bound to come,” Jesus said, “but woe to anyone by whom they come.”

Those are words about how to live together in a diverse community, in recognition that what we do may have an effect on what others who observe us doing it – for better or for worse – and the need to live in that awareness and be respectful.

And then, because God’s promised restoration of right relationships won’t be complete in this life, the Church is still going to have to deal with sin – not just the sins of non-believers, but the sins of “disciples,” of *members* of the Christian community. Sins against *each other*.

And Jesus’ words in verses three and four the chapter are both profound and challenging. First, you “must rebuke the offender.” No option. No sweeping misbehavior under the rug in the Church. But it doesn’t stop there. “if there is repentance, you must forgive.” No option there either. And then, not just once, or twice, or more. Even “seven times a day” (with “seven” being that symbolic word

in the Bible that really means “the complete number,” or in this case, *as many times as necessary*).

In reality, we have trouble forgiving people *even once*. And so did the disciples, and they *knew* it.

And so they said, “increase our faith!” If that’s how it’s going to be in the Church, we need more faith!

In Greek, it is possible to phrase questions in such a way that the answer is an obvious “yes” or “no.” It is *also* possible to phrase “if-then” propositions so that the readers understand the meaning to be either that the “if” part of the proposition is true or false, without having to state it.

When Jesus responded to their request, from the way his response is written in Greek, it meant “if you had faith the size of a mustard seed . . . and *of course*, you DO . . . then you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

The obvious meaning, then, is that it isn’t a matter of increasing their faith. They *have* faith.

From there, he uses analogies based on cultural assumptions of that time – in a society where there were clear boundaries and expectations of rank. There were Lords and Masters, and there were servants and slaves. And generally, you were one or the other, without much in between. The questions Jesus poses have obvious answers (to First Century hearers), that are again obvious in the Greek. Would you have your slave come and join you at the table before you were served? Of course not. That is not a slave’s role. Would you direct them to serve you *first*, and then eat. That’s just the way it was done. And then would you thank them, as though they had done something other than simply what they were supposed to do? Of course not. They were simply following orders.

Understand, Jesus was also saying to his disciples, here, that *they* are the slave in the story, not the Lord. Together, we all *serve* the Lord – who was himself the archetype of a Servant, because he gave himself completely for our sake. We aren’t servants so that we can be “promoted” to something else, or to different “standings” within the Church. It doesn’t work that way. We are *all* servants.

Fred Craddock, in his commentary on this passage, puts it like this: “the request for increase of faith must not seduce the apostles or any other leaders to assume that with the increase comes elevation in position so that the period of

serving ends. Apostles and all leaders of the faithful come under the instructions for all disciples. In the field, or in the house, a servant is a servant.

So, servants of the Servant we are, and servants of the Servant we shall remain. Together, to the best of our ability. We *have* faith. We *need* gifts of patience, forbearance, humility, open minds, forgiving hearts, and more. And we need to take one day at a time, seeking to live more and more into the likeness of Christ, but with the awareness that temptations, and weaknesses still exist, and sins are still being committed.

This is World Communion Sunday, a reminder that the Christian Church far transcends the little piece of it that we call “church” and know as our “church family.” It is also a reminder of what Paul pointed out to Timothy in our Epistle reading for the morning, that the Church of *today* owes its continued existence to the faith of the generations who have come before us, just as the Church of *tomorrow* depends on *our* faithfulness.

Jesus’ message to the disciples and Apostles is like Paul’s to Timothy at a time when obviously needed encouragement to stand up and demonstrate a “spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” The message is: we *have* the faith. We just need to continue to do what we have been commanded by our Lord to do, which he stated very clearly back at the beginning of the chapter, with respect to *being* the Christian community – be loving and respectful, living in mutual accountability, *in a spirit of forgiveness*.

Let us also come to the Lord’s Table this day in that spirit – giving thanks for the incredible opportunity God has given us to be faithful servants of the Servant whose death and resurrection we celebrate in the elements of his body broken, and blood shed.

To God be the glory.