

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 22
Year C

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 37:1-10
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

“Increase our faith.” That is the request the apostles make to Jesus at the beginning of our reading from Luke’s Gospel today. Why do they need their faith increased? Jesus answers them with the parable of the mustard seed. How does this help? Matthew used this parable to explain why the disciples were unable to cure someone. Why does Luke put it here?

This is one of those places where the creators of the lectionary do not help us. They begin the reading in the middle of the story and expect us to make sense of it. To understand the request the apostles make, we need to go back a few verses.

In verse three of this chapter, Jesus says, “Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.” Jesus continues to point out that we must forgive their sins even if they come to us multiple times a day. To this, the apostles ask for their faith to be increased. Even further back, in verses one and two, Jesus cautions the disciples not to be the cause of anyone stumbling. Again, this might be a cause for the apostles to ask for more faith.

In this version of the story of the mustard seed, Jesus is not chastising the apostles, but is encouraging them. There is no rebuke in His voice. And, Jesus is definitely not suggesting we should see the spectacle of trees flying through the air. He is stating that, even with a tiny bit of faith, anything is possible. It is not a question of quantity of our faith, but the purpose to which we use our faith. We already have all of the faith we need.

The next part of the reading is equally difficult to understand. Jesus seems to be calling the slave who works all day in the field and then comes in and prepares his master’s dinner worthless. But, that is not the point of the story. As is shown in the last verse in our reading, Jesus is telling us not to get puffed up over forgiving someone over and over again, even an infinite number of times. That is what we are called to do, as we saw back in the earlier verses. We know this by looking at the prevailing ethos of Jewish piety at the time. There, it is held that man was created to fulfill the Law. Thus, it is our duty to forgive others over and over again. That is what requires increased faith. It is the power to forgive that impresses, not flying trees.

As we listen to this passage from Luke’s Gospel, let us not hear condemnation, but love. We already have enough faith. We need to live our faith, serving God with both a sense of duty and a sense of delight. We serve God and one another because we know this is the example Jesus gave us. We are not afraid to mess up because we know that we are here to support each other, to pick up the pieces, and move forward. God does not expect perfection, only love - one for another. Let us walk in that love.