

Luke 17:1-10 (focus on 3-6) October 3, 2010 (World Communion Sunday)

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It's a wonderfully full morning, so let's jump right into.

**Verses 1 and 2 remind us that we will stumble.**

We know this—the world is not fully restored nor are our any of our lives sinless—*not by a long shot.*

This doesn't mean that we confuse the freedom we have in Christ to be a license for behaviors that spit in God's very face.

Freedom to live for Christ has always meant to be a freedom to live **within** patterns of self-control and discipline.

In other words:

--Not all apples in the garden are meant to be eaten. *Never have been.*

--Not everything that feels good is actually healthy or spiritually edifying.

--For that matter, we've never been given a blank-slate to live how we desire or spend like only we matter or to abuse creation as if we were the Creator or to think as if our minds could fully capture God's mystery and awe.

In this:

--The laws and prophets are means to shape discipline and purpose into our freedoms.

--God's story of salvation is meant to direct our commitments and our passions.

--Christ's very example (The Living Word) is to be the best model in how to specifically devote our lives and lifestyles for the sake of God and others.

Today's text specifically warns about causing others to stumble—especially what text calls "little ones"—meaning those freshly baptized, like Oscar and Abigail this morning, and those newer to the story of salvation.

*Such persons are especially vulnerable to the cancerous power of sin.*

Sure enough, we have a special responsibility to protect and nurture those who have been entrusted to our spiritual care—very similar to parents of new born children who are extremely cute, but also extremely vulnerable to the realities of the world.

This means, when these younger or less spiritually mature brothers and sisters see us gossip and stab each other's backs, they are not only learning destructive behaviors, but they will actually be nurtured in ugly pools of cynicism and skepticism.

That when they see us find ways of explicitly cheating the IRS or degrading politicians that we don't like, they are learning that we are no different than others in allowing hatred or deception or greed to rule our actions.

That when they see us refuse to either seek forgiveness or grant it to others, they are quite honestly learning just the opposite of what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about.

**This leads to verses 3 and 4.**

In the spirit of discipline and honesty, the church is meant to be a gigantic mirror to help one another see who Christ is in all of his glory, and in doing so, to also see who we are in all of our need for grace.

In an ideal scenario, the Holy Spirit and such mirrored honesty help us approach the waters of forgiveness in our fully humanity —knowing that our sins can and will be forgiven in the name of our Triune God.

--This is one of the reasons that we have a corporate confession each and every week.

--This is also a reason I encourage you to use daily rhythms of confession within your devotional life—even if this means simply using the penitential section of the Lord's Prayer—"forgive us our sins, as we forgive others."

But, if we refuse to own our sin or refuse to seek God's forgiveness, verse 3 clearly talks about the church needing to find its voice of rebuke.

We don't do this well--- I don't do this well.

Of course, there have been other times in which the church has also been either too zealous in this work over strangely selective in which sins it chooses, or not, to prioritize.

Still, in refusing to talk about discipline we have neglected our role, as Christ's body, in helping support and care for one another within the freedoms and responsibilities of the gospel.

***Christ doesn't stop here because rebuking the unrepentant is just one part of the verse.***

In the very next breadth, Jesus tells the disciples repentance must always lead to forgiveness.

*There is no caveat, here.*

It doesn't matter how salacious the deed or thoughtless the sin.

We're clearly told that we must forgive like God forgives us.

We must (Christ's words, not mine) we must offer second chances, new beginnings, fresh starts.

Even if this same person slips up again and again and again in the very same way. *Even then we are to still forgive.*

The rabbinic ideal in this regard was to forgive someone the perfect number of 3 times-- which is impressive in the light of how difficult it is to even forgive someone once.

But Jesus, again, expands and intensifies this OT understanding of forgiveness to require doing so even 7 times a day.

In other parts of the gospel, we are told to forgive 7 times 70.

Again, it isn't to matter what persons did (past tense).

It isn't to matter how much hurt was caused through such past actions.

It isn't even to matter if there is a track record of habitual mistakes.

--We must forgive.

--We must be and do the gospel.

--We must become God's instruments of reconciliation which can only happen if we continually seek ways of mending brokenness, healing division, and restoring relationships.

**This is all especially true within the body.**

I mean, how will we have any credibility in our public witness if we refuse to tangibly love one-another through such work.

**In fact, the basic building block to our life together as Christ's body is the willingness to seek and extend forgiveness.**

Without such a building block and corresponding hunger to see transformation happen, we are merely a social club where self-interest will always trump what God is trying to do in reconciling the world through a community of servants (the church) taking reconciliation and restoration and forgiveness as seriously as salvation itself.

*Back at the text*, the disciples were grasping the awesome responsibility and challenge of such a vision.

"Please increase our faith," they pleaded, knowing how divided people are from one another and how comfortable we've all become in the brokenness of our lives—even within the church.

In other words, they recognized how difficult it is for forgiveness to reign within a world where skin color still divides most churches; where 50 % of marriages end in divorce; where the gap between the rich and poor is as high as in the late 60s; where rhetorical bluster and obstructionism flow from our political leaders; where discipline and self-control and commitment have become optional; where living for the sake of others is merely thought of some utopian pipe dream.

**One of my favorite biblical scholars, Fred Craddock, offers a helpful corrective to Christ's response to their plea.**

Too often, we've interpreted verse 6 as a reprimand and chastisement.

Kind of like, Jesus telling those disciples, "It's true, you really don't have much faith."

But in Greek sentence construction there are actually two ways to frame if-led-conditional sentences.

The first is such condition *contrary to the fact*—if you only had such faith, and you don't.

**Again, this is often how this passage is translated and applied.**

But, I'm with Craddock in hearing something very different from Jesus because the second option is a *condition according to fact*—if *Marcie is cute*, and she is. *If Jesus is Lord, and he is...*

So, in other words, within the wider challenge of these verses comes a wonderful (a needed) encouragement from our Savior.

Hear Christ's words anew:

If you had the faith of a mustard seed, and you do, mulberry trees could be uprooted, mountains moved, lives all around you transformed.

Remember, that in being baptized into Christ's death we are also baptized into his glory.

In looking at this world, we therefore see truth through the lens of the resurrection.

Nothing, through such lens, can be considered impossible or undoable or irresolvable or unredeemable or irreconcilable.

**I'm not trying to simply spew some pious language here, I mean it.**

---If we believe that God become human, and we do;

—if we believe that Christ rose from the dead, and we do;

—and if we believe that we, too, will be bodily raised into glory with God forever, and we do—then, how can we ever doubt or diminish the power of God to also heal our broken relationships and to extend the work of reconciliation within this world.

**Of course, before we talk about cosmic redemption we need to first deal with the barriers and brokenness within our own lives and within our own body.**

That is exactly what Jesus was challenging and encouraging those specific disciples to wrestle with then, and us now,—especially on a Sunday where we celebrate our wider connectedness (our wider communion) with brothers and sisters around the church universal.

What needs forgiveness in your life?

Who needs forgiveness?

(From a different angle) What needs to be released over to God in order to have greater peace—or wholeness?

For my part, I sincerely seek your forgiveness in whatever ways I have hurt you or wronged you or failed you.

On behalf of this church, I also ask for your forgiveness in whatever we may have done or not done over the years that has also caused pain.

This is all so important because I believe in the power of reconciliation....

I believe in the power of that gift of faith we've been given to move mountains for the sake of the gospel;

I certainly believe in the power of God's love that fuels all needed passion, commitment and vision for us practice ever deepening rhythms of forgiveness.

Let us pray.

