

Luke 17:1-10
Pentecost 22C
October 6, 2019
“Use the Faith”

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

St. Luke tracks Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem to face His destiny. On the way, He teaches ... crowds, Pharisees and scribes, and His disciples. His apostles ask, (Luke 17:5) *“Increase our faith!”* To which Jesus responds, (Luke 17:6) *“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.”*

When I hear this exchange between Jesus and His disciples, I go back to 1980, 39 years ago, to *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*. Young Luke Skywalker knows he has a mysterious gift called “The Force.” But, he has little idea what it is or how to use it properly until a centuries old, little green guy with long pointy ears – a Jedi master named Yoda – shows up in the mist of the swamp planet Dagobah to accept Luke as his disciple in the ways of the Force. One day, while standing on his hands with Yoda perched on his feet, Luke is lifting rocks with the Force when his fighter sinks into a swamp. He tumbles, the rocks fall, and Yoda comes crashing to the ground. Luke’s completely distraught, *“We’ll never get it out now...”* Yoda responds, *“Always with you it cannot be done.”* Yoda urges Luke to use the Force. So Luke says, *“I’ll try.”* Then comes one of Yoda’s most quoted lines, *“Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try.”* And so, Luke reluctantly begins trying to lift the fighter ... and fails. *“I can’t. It’s too big.”* *“Size matters not,”* says Yoda. Then he picks the ship out of the swamp using the Force. He plants it back on solid ground. Luke says, *“I don’t believe it.”* To which Yoda responds, *“And that is why you fail.”*

Young Skywalker is a good representation of Jesus' disciples as they receive a warning from Him, *"Watch what you say so you don't lead anyone into sin ... oh ... and forgive people their sins ... and do it completely whenever they confess them to you!"*

"What's that Jesus?! Forgive sins?! We can't do that!" They'd seen Jesus do it. But He also turned water into wine, healed sick people, and raised the dead! Even still, He caught some serious flack for forgiving! The Pharisees and scribes railed against Him saying, (Luke 5:21) *"Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* And the disciples knew they weren't God ... far from it! And now Jesus tells them to forgive sins! He might as well have been telling them to raise inanimate objects with their minds and plant them elsewhere.

Had these disciples already forgotten how on their first mission they had power over demons exclaiming, (Luke 10:17) *"Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!"* Now they weren't sure they could forgive sins ... they didn't think they had enough faith. *"Lord, we can't. That's too big ... too hard."* Jesus responds, *"Size matters not. With faith like a grain of mustard seed you could move this mulberry tree and plant it in the sea. Use the faith!"*

Jesus uses the example of a mulberry tree, with its roots reaching far and wide, to reveal the possibilities that exist with faith. With even the smallest amount of faith, the hardest things can be done as God wills. So ... use the faith ... to move your mulberry tree! And forgiveness, that's a very stout mulberry tree. Yet Jesus says, *"Use the faith! If someone sins against you, even seven times in a single day ... forgive them!"* I don't know about you, but that's a mulberry tree I find very hard to move. *"I can't. It's too big."* Jesus tells us, *"Size matters not ... use the faith."*

Despite Jesus' assurance, we say, *"I can't. It's too big."* It seems "forgiveness" is a dirty word ... a sign of weakness. We're told ... when we forgive, we lose control ... we can't let people off the

hook. When we forgive, the motive for sweet revenge goes away. When we forgive, we can't get even ... there's no payback ... we're left with nothing. Still, Jesus says, "*Use the faith! Forgive.*"

So, what's your "mulberry tree?" Is it a grudge you've held against someone for longer than you can remember – a root that's grown incredibly deep? Perhaps it's someone who makes you angry with a behavior you can't stand ... and the behavior keeps going on and on – the root goes deeper and deeper? Have you suffered insult or personal slights over your appearance, performance or whatever – the root spreads and digs in? Have you been cheated, betrayed, lied to ... or worse? Or maybe ... it's not something someone did to you, but rather a sin you committed against another ... something you just can't forgive yourself for? What's your mulberry tree ... the one God wants you to uproot and replant? Where's Jesus saying, "*Use the faith,*" to you?

I imagine we all have a couple mulberry trees. Which one would be the hardest to move? How much faith would you need to move that one? Jesus tells us, **(Luke 17:6)** "*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.*" Jesus tells us, "*Use the faith!*"

I pray nobody would have to endure the loss of a loved one or close friend at the hands of another. And if you have, I can't even imagine what that's like. Forgiveness in this particular case might be next to impossible, if not completely impossible.

Yet as Jesus finally entered Jerusalem to fulfill His destiny ... to carry out His Father's plan to redeem His creation. Jesus boldly endured ... betrayal by one of His own disciples. Desertion by the rest. Taunts, beatings with whips affixed with flesh-tearing bites, and, finally, crucifixion ... nailed through hands and feet to a wooden cross with metal spikes. Yet hanging on the cross, in agonizing pain, Jesus looked down on the crowds gathered to watch the spectacle. Though Jesus was looking

down on the crowds gathered on that particular day ... He not only saw His disciples, the soldiers, and the Temple rulers ... He saw us ... you and me. All mankind's sins – from Adam and Eve, to you and me today, to generations yet to come – nailed Jesus to the cross ... to suffer and die as the price for those sins. And from that hideous, blood-soaked tree ... He forgave each one of us, (Luke 23:34) *“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”* Jesus moved the firmly rooted tree of our lives, covered in sin into a new place. Rising from the dead three days later, He replanted that tree, cleansed of all sin, into the sea of life. A new life found in the waters of baptism where He also gives us all the gift of faith!

Like a small seed, faith is a vessel containing something much larger. Just as a seed, when planted, produces a much larger plant ... so too does our faith. Faith contains God's promises of forgiveness and eternal life. When planted in our lives and nourished by God's Word, faith grows to enable us to do things greater than we can imagine ... including forgiving ourselves and others ... even in the most difficult of circumstances.

I think a murderer would be one of the most difficult people to forgive. Especially if they murdered a family member. Last year, Botham Jean ... a church-going, certified public accountant, role model and brother ... was killed by a stranger named Amber Guyger. Amber came home from her work as a police officer in Dallas. As she came near what she thought was her apartment, she saw what she believed was a burglar. She shot and killed Botham Jean.

On the stand, Amber admitted that she intended to shoot the intruder dead. And she did. Hitting him in the chest. Only then did she realize her mistake ... Botham wasn't in her apartment ... she was Botham's apartment. In tears, Amber said, *“I wish he was the one with the gun and killed me ... I am so sorry ... I hate that I have to live with this every day of my life. I ask God for forgiveness and*

I hate myself every day." Amber confessed and yet couldn't forgive herself ... Meanwhile, 18-year old Brandt Jean, who'd lost not only a brother, but his role-model and friend, sat listening to this woman who killed his only brother ...

Amber was convicted of murdering Botham Jean. At the sentencing hearing, Brandt got up to give his victim impact statement. Here's what this 18-year old boy said (video at this [link](#)) as he faced his brother's killer, *"If you truly are sorry, I can speak for myself, I forgive and I know if you go to God and ask Him, He will forgive you ... I love you just like anyone else ... I don't even want you to go to jail. I want the best for you ... And the best would be to give your life to Christ ... I love you as a person and I don't wish anything bad on you."* Then he turned to the judge saying, *"I don't know if this is possible, but can I give her a hug, please? Please?"* The judge approved and Brandt and Amber hugged and spoke for over a minute right there in the courtroom. Brandt, an 18-year old disciple of Christ, brought up in His church, "used the faith" ... he moved a mulberry tree by forgiving Amber ... and by the power of the Holy Spirit, hopefully she'll one day forgive herself.

You and I have been given the gift of faith. We use the faith. We pray in faith, *"Our Father ... forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* In faith, we believe our Father forgives us. Then we ask Him to help us do the hardest thing ... bring His forgiveness into the world by forgiving others. That through our mercy and love ... others would see and come to know Him as we do. Then, one day, cleansed of all sin by Jesus' blood, we'll find ourselves planted in eternity, unified with Christ and those we've forgiven, and those who've forgiven us ... in our Father's new creation.

Grace be with you. Amen.

James Kent