

October 6, 2019  
Pentecost + 17 c, Virginia Synod  
Luke 17:5-10

In today's Gospel, Jesus is rather harsh, isn't he? After he teaches the disciples about forgiving others, they ask him to increase their faith. He replies with extreme examples to show that their faith does not measure up even to that of a mustard seed. Then he reminds the disciples that they are worthless slaves, who should not expect any thanks for doing their duties.

As I considered the harshness of Jesus, I thought about how wise teachers often instruct their advanced students. These teachers may answer questions in ways that sound both totally irrelevant and downright insulting; but these replies get to the heart of the question, far more than the students had imagined.

In this lesson, I think that Jesus is like that. His provocative statements about mustard seeds and being slaves got me thinking about magic and faith. Maybe that's part of what this lesson is about.

Let's start with magic. Magic is about using supernatural powers to get me what I want rather than to change what I want. The bottom line of magic is my will be done.

But aren't our wills at the root of so many of our problems? Sure, we often want good stuff. But we also want things that are bad for us, bad for other people, or bad for the world in which we live. When our desires control our lives, they so often lead us into serious regrets.

I hear a warning in today's lesson. Beware of those who talk about faith as though it were magic and about God as though he were our slave.

They say that God wants to give us what pleases us. They say that God wants to change our circumstances to be more like what we want them to be. They say we can be healthy, wealthy, and popular with the help of some spiritual aids, if only we believe enough. Isn't this the opposite of what Jesus said in today's lesson about being slaves?

There's a trap in the magic talk of "prosperity theology." Bad things may happen to people who seem to be good. Does that mean that God didn't keep his end of the bargain? Does it mean that these people really lacked faith?

Or could it be that God's will is wiser than our wills? And that God loves us more than we love ourselves? Whether God says "yes" to our prayers or not, could it be that that God has the best plan for us and our universe, even if we don't understand it now?

This question leads us what Christian faith is all about. Our faith is about Jesus Christ, who died on the cross, rose from the dead, and shall come again.

2000 years ago, Jesus did not open the way to great material wealth for himself or his followers. Rather, Jesus was rejected by religious and national leaders, abandoned by his disciples, and executed as a heretic and a rebel.

Jesus got in trouble by calling people to change their ways. Why did he do this? Because they were making things worse by trying to have it their ways.

Magic is about manipulating supernatural powers to get my way, but Christian faith is about receiving spiritual help to live God's way. Christian faith is about forgiving as we are forgiven. It's about loving people more as God loves them, whether we happen to like them or not. Christian faith is about sacrificing for others as Jesus sacrificed for us.

This faith does more than move trees and mountains. It changes lives and saves souls, so that more and more we seek God's will first.

The magic talk of prosperity theology avoids the cross. Christian faith is centered in the cross. Jesus called his disciples to take up our crosses for him as he took up his cross for us. He changes us so that we become more faithful rather than more satisfied.

Jesus calls us to follow him in bringing hope and help to the sick, the poor, the rejected, and the sorrowful. These people may not give telegenic testimonials about how all their burdens were removed by a miracle. They may not leap out of their wheelchairs, but Jesus says that how we treat them to be how we treat him.

I don't know anybody who would consciously choose to suffer unnecessarily. Even Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that his cup might pass.

Yet, sometimes, suffering happens because we do dangerous things that hurt us; or it happens because other people do bad things to us, whether they mean to or not. Sometimes, pain comes from nature doing what it does, whether through disease, disaster, or just how we're made. Sometimes, suffering is inevitable consequence of loving God or loving people in the midst of a broken world.

Regardless, when afflictions come, faith sees this as an opportunity to grow closer to the crucified God who suffered for us. Faith sees suffering as a reminder that "this world is not yet our home." Faith sees both joys and sorrows as opportunities that God can use for our good and the good of others.

Rather than offer us the magic that would spare us from suffering, Jesus comes to us through even our afflictions. He comes to us as one who suffers with us and for us. He comes to us through his Word, his Sacraments, prayer, and fellow believers.

Jesus calls us to go to those who suffer, that he may use us to comfort them and give them hope in his promises. For by the power of his cross and resurrection, Jesus

does promise us that day when there shall be a new heaven and a new earth where every tear shall be wiped away, where pain and death shall be no more, and where righteousness shall have a home. That's part of the hope that Jesus offers to believers.

You can find people and products that will promise you almost anything you want, for a price. Many of them overpromise, overcharge, and underdeliver. Some actually may do some good.

But at best, they can do only so much good. For we need something more than magic, technology, or other great stuff that may help us to do our wills. We need to be transformed so that we are grateful to be dutiful slaves who do God's will, as best as we can discern it.

The real miracle is that when God's grace flows through us, we become our best selves, our unique selves, our free selves. For the greatest blessings of all shall come when God's will is done fully and completely on earth as in heaven. May that day come more and more, moment by moment, through each of us. Amen

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