**October 6, 2013 – 20th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)**

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Oh Luke! Luke, Luke, Luke! You're killing me here! Nobody wants to talk about slaves – either owning them or being them. Slavery is part of our dark past in this country, which we would just as soon put behind us. Well, unfortunately, today Jesus lays out yet another puzzling and disturbing parable for us to chew on

So let's not talk about slavery just yet. First, let's talk about faith. Faith and forgiveness. Jesus talks a lot about faith, obviously, in all of the Gospels. But he only uses the mustard seed illustration twice – here in Luke, and in Matthew.

In Matthew, he uses it in response to the disciples not being able to cast out a particular demon. In that illustration, Jesus tells his disciples that if they only had as much faith in God as a tiny mustard seed, they could move mountains, and could certainly cast out demons. This version makes sense – casting out demons is a God-based activity, so naturally faith would be a big part of it.

But Luke's version is different. First of all, the landscaping is on a much smaller scale – transplanting a tree from land to the sea. Though still supernatural, it's not nearly as spectacular as moving mountains. Second, the apostles themselves ask Jesus to increase their faith, rather than Jesus responding to them about why they couldn't do something requiring faith. They're not puzzled as to why they can't do something, but rather they figure they must need more faith to do the enormous task at hand.

And what is it that he's asking them to do? The answer to that question is in the four verses that come just before our Gospel reading today, in Chapter 17, verses 1-4:

"Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciplesins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

Oh. He's telling them to do two things – to keep from being a stumbling block to other people, and to forgive other disciples if they sin against you, but repent. Every single time. Hmmm, maybe this IS harder than moving mountains or trees around.

Well, no WONDER the apostles say, "Increase our faith!" What Jesus is asking is darned near impossible!

So let's break it down. First Jesus tells us that people are bound to stumble in their faith. They are bound to make mistakes. But, he says, WE'D better not be the cause of their stumbling. That would be really, really bad. Bad enough that it would be better if we died rather than cause someone to stumble. Believe me, as a priest, this one keeps me up at night. And by his use of the term "little ones," he's specifically referring to people who are weaker or more vulnerable than we are.

So that's one thing. Then he shocks them all by using the F-word. The F-bomb. The Effenheimer! Forgive! You MUST forgive. No matter what people do to you, and no matter how many times they do either the same thing, or different things, you must forgive them if they repent. Whoa!

These two things, then, are what the disciples are asking for more faith in order to be able to accomplish – not causing people to stumble in their faith and forgiving them no matter what they do. The thing about these two particular tasks is that they require us to overcome our own human egos.

Ah, Ego! Our old friend. The source of many of the world's ills. That part of us that is SURE that we are the most important creature on earth. And there are few combinations as toxic as ego and religion. There are too many examples to list of pastors, especially televangelists, who are intoxicated by the power or the money that comes with their form of religion. Not all of them are like that, obviously, but enough are to make it a recognizable problem.

And for a reverse example, just look at the furor that the new Pope, Francis, is causing. He apparently DOESN'T think the world, or even the Roman Catholic world, revolves around him, and it's driving the rest of the Church leadership nuts. He lives in a simple apartment, he drives a used car around the Vatican, and he doesn't wear all the jewels and trappings that people are used to seeing draped all over Popes gone by. And he doesn't seem to believe he's infallible. He seems to have his ego firmly in check.

But feeding our ego is an insidious trap. Even if we're not in a position of great ecclesiastical power and influence, all of us are potentially in the position to bully others with our beliefs, OR to scoff at others' beliefs if they aren't what we think is true. For someone who is new to the faith, or who has doubts, this kind of bickering and struggling for dominance could be just the kind of stumbling block Jesus is talking about here.

And then there's that whole forgiveness thing. Unlike other times when Jesus talks about forgiveness, where he's talking about forgiving our enemies, here he's talking about people we're in relationship with – other disciples. Sometimes, that's the hardest thing to do, to really forgive someone who's close to us – a friend, a spouse, or even ourselves. Oh we SAY we're forgiving them, but then how many times do we bring up something from the past to use as a weapon in an argument. That's not true forgiveness, and Jesus knows that we need to keep forgiving and forgiving each other to keep our relationships healthy and strong, and centered on God.

The good news is, that despite what the apostles thought, we really only need a tiny bit of faith to keep our egos in line. It only takes a mustard seed's worth of faith to keep that door to God open, even the smallest crack, and if we keep our focus on God, we can't focus on ourselves and we CAN do those things that Jesus lays out as vital.

Which brings us back to slavery. Jesus' slavery parable isn't really a parable at all. It's more of a challenge. And it's a strangely worded challenge at that. Usually when we use a metaphor to help someone see themselves in a different light, we keep the point of view consistent. But Jesus changes it up. At first, we're the slave-owners:

Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, `Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, `Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?

Then, all of a sudden, we're the slaves:

So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, `We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'

So which is it? Are we the slaves or the masters? The answer is "both." It's called Servant Leadership. In Luke 22, verses 26 and 27, Jesus makes it clear:

But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

While Luke's audience would have been very familiar with slavery, since it was a major part of the ancient world, the idea of being a slave was no more palatable then than it is now. And here Jesus is telling us that not only are we slaves, but we're not even supposed to expect thanks for all the hard work we do.

That's pretty hard to hear. Everyone likes to be acknowledged for what they do. We like a fair day's wages for a fair day's work. But that's our ego talking, and this is where our faith comes in. In Jesus' slavery story, even though the slave has to work, he can expect that he'll be able to eat and drink later. And even though we might not be rewarded for our work for the Kingdom of God here on earth, we can expect to receive our reward in heaven. Our faith, even faith as small as the tiniest seed, tells us that this is so.

That is, if our ego lets it. Let's not fall into the trap of "it isn't fair," or the more insidious, "I don't need much, just a little acknowledgement for all I do for you, God." Just like we give up our ego in forgiving others, or not causing them to stumble, let's give up our ego in our need to be recognized for what we do, when what we do is what God is expecting of us. Let go, and simply trust God.

Amen.