

October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022

## Luke 17:1-10 “Increase Our Faith”

Every week it seems like I say, “Here’s another hard-to-understand Jesus-parable. This one’s a doozy. Hold on to your hats.” The problem we have this week is that Jesus switched from parables to proverbs. What’s the difference? Parables are stories. They start out with, “There once was a rich man who wore purple clothes” or “There was a woman who lost a coin” or “There was a man who had two sons.” Proverbs, on the other hand, are sayings that can be used to communicate a helpful piece of wisdom. From 1732 until 1758 Benjamin Franklin published *Poor Richard’s Almanac* which was filled with proverbs that promoted skills for personal living. Some examples include, “He that drinks his cider alone, let him catch his horse alone.” “A friend in need is a friend indeed.” “Clean your finger before you point out my spots.” And of course, “Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” Now, to be sure, a lot of Jesus’ parables had a proverb that went along with it. Jesus *could* have just said, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.” But the stories or parables that went along with the proverb were sometimes shocking in their use of absurdity and unrealistic circumstances. For example, “You cannot serve God and wealth,” wouldn’t have been as fun without the story of the steward who cheated his boss or the rich guy who wore purple clothes and designer underwear.

What we’ve got in front of us today is a handful of proverbs that Jesus just throws out there without much context or nuance. “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.” No funny story to help folks get their heads wrapped around this one. The one about slaves and masters has a little more complexity, but it’s still pretty blunt compared to what we’ve heard over the last few weeks. Even the great Fred Craddock, once said, “You might want to skip these when they come up in the lectionary and save them for

another day.” No thank you, Dr. Craddock. I’m going to tackle it because, you know, “In for a penny, in for a pound.” Which is a proverb I just used for irony’s sake since we’re talking about proverbs today. See how proverbs can fall so flat without context? They’re almost worse than “dad jokes.”

This week, we’ve got four lessons – One is about the consequences of causing another person to stumble. One is about forgiveness. One is about having faith. And one that’s about the importance of doing what is expected. The problem is they’ve all been terribly misused. One has been used to justify redemptive violence, one has been used to promote prosperity gospel, one is used by atheists to de-bunk faith and religion, and one is used by pro-slavery advocates, past and present, to justify slavery and oppression. The challenge here is trying to connect these proverbs together, and to do that we’ve got to look at the big picture.

Jesus is no longer talking to scribes, Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners. He’s talking to his disciples now. Maybe that’s why he’s shifted from parables to proverbs. He doesn’t need a story to “hook” his disciples because they’re already on board with him. The first proverb starts out with “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come.” I can picture the disciples nodding and thinking, “Hmm. True that. Stumbling blocks abound when you’re trying to live the good life.” But then Jesus drives the point in a little harder by saying, “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.” That’s when the disciples start squirming a little. “Daggone, that’s harsh.” Jesus goes on – “Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.” The disciples are thinking, “Oh, this is about forgiveness. And he’s talking about us ... he’s talking about his disciples. Rebuke the offender? No problem, I’ve been waiting to rebuke Thaddeus for calling me a teacher’s pet a few weeks ago.” Then Jesus says, “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.” Silence. “Wait, is he saying that if someone sins against me 49 times a week, I’ve got to forgive them?” They’re all scratching their heads thinking, “That doesn’t sound right!” Finally, one of them speaks up. “Okay Jesus. Increase our faith.” Maybe that’s another way of saying, “That’s a tall order there Jesus, you’re asking for a *lot* if you expect us to practice that kind of forgiveness. That’s foolish. You can’t expect us to do that. What are you saying here?”

Jesus says, “Increase your faith? Okay, if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” More silence. The disciples are back to being confused. “Did he just say that if we have faith we’ll develop telekinetic powers? I mean, sure, he’s done some pretty miraculous things since we’ve met him, but he’s never done that. What’s the point?” See, this is why Jesus is such a remarkable teacher. If you can get your students thinking like this and not just feeding them pat answers you’re doing well. But then Jesus hits them with the tough one ... the one that supporters of slavery and oppression have used for centuries to justify their sin. This is a whole different level of “are you kidding me Jesus?”

So, if we’re going to tackle this, let’s go back to the beginning. By the way, if I were following the lectionary to the letter this week, we’d be starting at verse 5 which is where the twelve say, “Increase our faith.” Craddock says, “If you *do* decide to tackle this section, don’t you dare do it without starting with verse one.” Craddock says that in order for us to know what’s going on we need to understand the difference between “disciple” and “apostle.” Most preachers say, “Well Jesus had many disciples, but the twelve he had in his inner-circle were called apostles.” And that’s true. But most of the time the twelve are simply referred to as disciples which makes it confusing for us. Craddock, as he often does, makes a distinction that was a game changer in my understanding the difference. Craddock says that a disciple is one who receives and an apostle is one who is sent. Even when the gospel writers are referring to Jesus’ interactions with the twelve, there are times when they are

receivers only, while at other times they are being commissioned to go into the world and carry out Jesus' agenda. That's when they are apostles, not just disciples. The twelve are always disciples. But when Jesus is giving them instructions that require action beyond receiving, they are apostles. The reason Craddock wants preachers to ignore the lectionary and start with verse one is that in verse 1-4, Jesus is addressing them as disciples. "Don't cause anyone to stumble, and when there is repentance, you must practice radical forgiveness." Then in verse 5 Luke says, "The *apostles* said to the Lord, 'increase our faith.'" They're asking, "What does this mean in terms of how we're supposed to carry out your mission in the world?"

This still doesn't address the slavery issue though does it? "Are you going to get around to that Jesse, or are you just going to hem and haw through it and hope we don't notice?" Nope. Let's tackle it. The first thing that most folks in the scholarly community address is the translation of the Greek word "doulon" which the NRSV and most other translations renders "slave." The NIV and CEV uses the word "servant." But "doulon" *is* a word we use in the English language. What do we call a professional who helps a woman through the natural birthing process? A doula. From experience, I can say that the doulas who helped Mary bring our boys into the world, received a paycheck. One can make a decent living as a doula. But is translating the word as "servant" in the New Testament just another way of sanitizing the text to make it more palatable? Most scholars agree that the word is best understood as, "someone in a servile condition or position," especially as it relates to one's household. Our biggest concern here in this text is, "how is this person compensated for their service?" One could say that a butler, a personal assistant, a life-coach, a driver, or even a nanny is a "doulon" or "doula." My daughter-in-law to be is a live-in home health-care professional and is paid a fair wage *and* receives housing as part of her compensation package. One of my high school classmates was a nanny for six years and in that time managed to save enough money to buy a house with cash. Back in biblical times douloi served the same kind of roles but were not compensated in the way that those who serve

as household managers do in our time and culture. With that in mind, we've got to acknowledge that the word and role of "slave" in biblical times is different from how we understand slavery today. You know who doesn't like to talk about this difference? Those who used and still use the bible to justify slavery in our own country's history. Those who believed their "douloi," were livestock. So yes, this is an especially difficult passage to hear when all we hear and understand when we hear the world "slave" is, "17<sup>th</sup> century trans-Atlantic slave trade." I'll give you this though – Remember how I said that last week's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is as much about the afterlife as the Tortoise and the Hare is about what kind of running shoes they were wearing? This proverb is about slavery as much as Little Red Riding hood is about the kind of flowers the little girl took to her grandma.

This handful of proverbs is the conclusion - the wrap-up - to all the parables he shared with the Pharisees, scribes, tax collectors and sinners over the past few chapters. The lessons of, "celebrating that which is lost" and "wastefully extravagant forgiveness" and "serving God instead of serving wealth," all come down to one simple point - "None of this is easy." It isn't easy to avoid stumbling. It isn't easy to have faith or be faithful. It isn't easy to forgive people over and over again. It isn't easy to serve God over all others. It isn't easy to treat others outside your social network with respect and dignity. The biggest challenges we face as disciples of Christ involve expectations, priorities, and who and what we serve. Being a part of God's kingdom means we have to stay engaged – mind, body and spirit. And it can be messy at times. It can *seem* impossible. But if you have even a mustard seed's worth of faith, anything is possible. Some people just can't do it though. "We can't operate at this level of forgiveness and grace and mercy. It's just easier to make hard, fast, all-encompassing, uncompromising rules. All this forgiveness and grace and mercy is a sign of weakness. We need to hold fast and be strong." People try to convince themselves and others that this is hard work. "Oh, it's easy to be merciful and forgiving. The hard work is being uncompromising and sticking to your guns!" Is it? Because I think it's a *lot* harder to act graciously and mercifully. It

requires very little effort for me to say, “I’m sorry, I can’t help you, I’m just following the letter of the law here!” But it takes a *lot* of work for me to say, “What would Jesus do in *this* situation, and do I have what it takes to do the same?” Following Jesus it not easy. Being a citizen under God’s reign is not always easy. That’s why Bible scholars label these sections, “The *difficult* teachings of Jesus.” They *are* difficult because we have to stay engaged and be in relationship to one another in order to address life’s biggest challenges. But instead of recognizing that this last little section of proverbs is about living faithfully we’ll say things like, “See? God says we can have slaves!” Thankfully God is faithful, merciful, gracious, patient and gives us many, many opportunities to repent and receive forgiveness.