

**Glenview Community Church
Glenview, Illinois**

**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
World Communion Sunday**

2 October 2022

Luke 17:5-10

Lord, increase our faith!

A Communion Meditation given by Rev. Dr. James M. Matarazzo, Jr.

Text: The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" Jesus replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. "Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So, you also, when you have done everything, you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (Luke 17:5-10 NIV)

I. A motto for the Twenty-first Century

I opted starting in October to use what is known as the Revised Common Lectionary for our Sunday readings until the New Year. This can be helpful because our Sunday School uses the same cycle of readings. This lectionary is ecumenical and that means that most mainline Protestant churches and Roman Catholic Church read the same scripture passages every Sunday in a three-year repeating cycle. However, when I saw this text from Luke's gospel, I regretted my decision. The first part starts out well, but the second part was tricky. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the one that lives in your pews, translates the word servant, as we heard just a moment ago, as slave. So, the second part of today's scripture has Jesus saying this: "*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? So, you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, [should] say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!' (Luke 17:7-10 NRSV) I assume a sermon entitled "You are worthless slaves!" would have sparked some interesting conversations. But it gives us some inconvenient and uncomfortable facts about the time in which Jesus lived.

Slavery was an almost universal human practice 2000 years ago. It was only abolished in the United States 157 years ago in 1865 and only after a civil war. Jewish law allowed slavery, although there were limitations and slave owners could be punished for mistreating slaves. Roman slavery was far harsher. A Roman could kill his slaves for any reason without penalty. The Roman Empire's economy was powered by slave labor – in fact, without slavery, Rome would not have become an empire. The Holy Land was under Roman control as the Province of Judaea during the time of Jesus. So, Jesus would have seen both forms of slavery on a daily basis. So, it may shock the modern ear to read about Jesus speaking so casually about a practice that the world has rejected as evil – but we have done so only recently. Humans have existed for 300,000 years give or take. We don't know when humans began enslaving one another, but we can assume that it has been practiced for millennia. For the apostles, as for Jesus, slavery was a given – they saw them every day. It is unlikely any of the disciples owned slaves, but they certainly knew people who did. This puts the gospel passage into context. The more palatable word 'servant' comes from the Latin word *servus* which simply means slave. In fact, whenever you read the word 'servant' in the Bible, it always means slave. The ancient title of the pope is *servus servorum Dei* or "servant of the servants of God." But it literally means "slave of the slaves of God." The common Arabic name Abdullah, translated as 'servant of God', literally means 'slave of God.' Jesus is telling his disciples who want him to increase their faith that they are God's slaves. And to make it harder still, he said they should think of themselves as *unworthy* slaves if they only do what is required by God. If they wish to be worthy, they must go beyond mere duty or obligation.

Bringing it back to the beginning of the text, the disciples want their faith increased. But Jesus tells them that their faith is less than a mustard seed – because if they had a mustard seed size faith, they could command impossible things like sending a mulberry bush to plant itself in the sea. The writer of Luke's Gospel is of course relating his story

of Jesus to the reader. Whoever wrote it, and we don't know if it was a man named Luke or someone writing under his name (a common practice), he is writing down the sayings he has heard. This is called redaction. We don't know the spoken words of Jesus as on a recording – in fact, a verbatim recording by a scribe would not have been possible. The apostles were likely illiterate, so someone else would have to write down the sayings. Luke's gospel was compiled in 60 AD or so – 60 years after the birth of Jesus and 30 or so after his death and resurrection. So, we don't know why Jesus was so demanding and even critical of his disciples. We do know that their plea – increase our faith! – is in part because Jesus demands so much of them. And yet, he does not do anything in this passage that would increase their faith. In the following verses of this chapter not read today, Jesus does work a miracle by healing 10 men of leprosy – and perhaps that did increase the disciples' faith.

But what I did hear in this passage is a motto for the 21st century – “Lord, increase our faith.” In an age of doubt and irreligion and uncertainty, it would seem that the most logical prayer of the Christian in 2022 is to pray daily “Lord, increase my faith.”

II. The means of grace

Today is World Communion Sunday. For Martin Luther, Holy Communion, or the Eucharist, or the Mass, or the Lord's Supper – this sacrament of bread and wine, was above all, a converting ordinance – a means of strengthening faith. Luther felt that coming to what he called the Sacrament of the Altar was a means to increase faith, a spiritual food for the soul. Later in Luke's gospel, shortly before Jesus is crucified., the writer of Luke relates the story of the Lord's Supper this way:

When the hour came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves, for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. (Luke 22:14-20 NRSV)

In other words, Jesus will not feast with them until he returns at the Second Coming. In effect the Lord's Supper is not only the Jewish Feast of the Passover but it is Christ's last meal on earth. He will be led away, crucified, and buried the next day. He will not be able to eat with them as he once did. Most of the disciples, except John and three women all named Mary who stay by the cross, will flee and go into hiding. It will be later that he will appear, after resurrection, to the disciples on the Emmaus Road. He again blessed bread, breaks it, and gives it to them – but he does not partake and then he vanishes. He shall not feast again until he returns. Maybe only then in that resurrection moment did Jesus give the disciples what they wanted most – an increase in faith.

Therefore, if you desire an increase in faith, or feel that faith is fleeting, then I would invite you to come to the Lord's Table in a few moments and perhaps you will, in the simple act of eating and drinking, have an increase in faith, an encounter with the Risen Lord, and feel Christ's blessing – according to Luke, the last thing Jesus did as he ascended into heaven was bless them (Luke 24:50). May this blessing be yours. Amen.