

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)
St. Luke 17:1-10

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

YOU BROOD OF VIPERS! You go around claiming you keep the law and have Abraham as your father, but you act like children of the devil! You present yourselves as being righteous before God, yet you don't even keep the commands and statutes of the Lord. You lift yourselves up as an example of righteous living, yet others can plainly see that you do not live in accordance with your own standards or those of God. **REPENT! PRODUCE FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE.** (cf. Luke 3:7-8)

These are harsh words, to be sure; but they are no more harsh than what you heard in this morning's Gospel. "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin." What could inspire such righteous anger in Jesus to utter such harsh words? Causing little ones to sin. What could cause little ones to sin? When you say one thing, presenting yourself as being righteous before God and lifting yourself up as an example of righteous living, but do something else.

Hypocrisy is deadly, judging by the curse Jesus pronounces. In fact, it's doubly deadly. For the one person—the hypocrite—they say one thing and do another, they believe one way and act another. For the other person, it creates mixed feelings about the first, it leads them astray, it offends them and turns them off—they believe that all people in the first person's camp are like the first, to the point that they want no part in what the first person is, even if what they profess to believe is the truth. In essence, two people suffer. Jesus is completely justified in His anger.

Jesus is, of course, referring to a believer, at least one who professes to be a believer or one who passes off their teaching or doctrine as the truth, who then would cause a little one to sin. Out of concern for the little one—the one of young or even no faith—it would seem that Jesus would prefer to eliminate the hypocrite who would influence the little one the wrong way, that He wants to spare one life where two could be lost. Or does he?

The great concern is that a Christian struggling with hypocrisy most does so if he does not repent when he is rebuked. Jesus said, "Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Repentance and forgiveness are the life of a Christian. A Christian, confronted with his sin, repents and is absolved from it; his sin is removed from him as far as the east is from the west, as the Psalmist writes. (Psalm 103:12)

Now, you know where this is going, I'm sure. This is a kind of hypocrisy all deal with. After all, who likes to be rebuked? So, when you are rebuked, how do you react most often? You make excuses, you deny it, you question the rebuke, but do you ever repent. And if you rebuke someone, how do you do it? Pointedly, accusingly, judgmentally...and if the one you rebuke repents, you don't forgive them. If anything, you might say, "It's okay," but deep down, you hold their repentance over them as something you can store in your back pocket and use against them sometime in the future.

Yes, you struggle with hypocrisy. So does the man in the pulpit. So everyone else beyond these walls compares how you act to what you say, and, well..."such lies; why would I want to be a part of that?" This reflects poorly on Christ, the author and perfecter of your faith. Does He really want to eliminate you in order to spare the one life? The fact that no one here has a millstone tied around their neck would indicate otherwise; the fact that you are still here to be rebuked, to rebuke, to repent and be absolved certainly indicates otherwise. Jesus would rather spare both lives; He would like to keep the little ones from sinning AND keep the rest from causing the little ones to sin.

Still, to be a Christian is to be like Christ, Who gave of Himself for others. But are you like Christ? No...certainly not always. You are, in fact, Christians in word, but not always in deed. You tell

others that you are members of a church, you might even wear crosses or crucifixes, or even shirts with Bible passages on them, but you do things that are contrary to your confession of faith. Case in point, a joke I once read, which is, admittedly, a little over the top:

A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman hit the roof and the horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection with him. As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer.

The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping the guy off in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker and the chrome-plated fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car."

It's a funny story, but sadly, it illustrates the point perfectly.

That's not even the half of it. A problem plaguing many congregations today (and for as long as believers have gathered together) is when someone may say, "Yeah, I'm a Christian, but I don't attend a church." Well, isn't going to church what a Christian does? People know what Christians do more than you might think they do. What does the non-believer or the one of little faith think when they know one claims to be Christian, but prefers to stay in bed on Sunday morning, or simply doesn't attend the gathering of the saints?

Recall, now, that Jesus would prefer not to toss anyone into a lake with a stone around their neck. "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost," (1 Timothy 1:15a) and there is no end to the debate over who is actually the worst. He came into the world to save even those who struggle with hypocrisy. Just as with every other sin, Jesus died having lived a perfect life, doing what He said and saying what He did, to forgive sins—who struggle with hypocrisy or coveting or theft or murdering or adultery and every other sin.

In Baptism, you have been claimed as a son of God and coheir with Christ of eternal life. In being claimed as a son of God, you have been given faith, a faith by which you can say, "Jesus is Lord"; a faith by which you can say, "Have mercy on me, a sinner," when confronted with your sin.

Forgiven, your cry and prayer is and continues to be like that of the apostles in today's lesson: "Increase our faith." Dear hearers, He answers that prayer each and every day as He comes to you in Word and Sacrament to forgive your sins. Even today, He gives you His body and blood hidden in bread and wine for the strengthening, the increase, of your faith.

And here's your comfort, dear Christians struggling with hypocrisy, Jesus tells you that with faith like a mustard seed, you can tell a mulberry tree to be uprooted and replant itself in the sea. So, why are the oceans not full of mulberry trees? Well, I'll get to that.

Let me begin by saying that you should not get caught up in the size of the seed, as if you ought to compare your faith to that. You should note that Jesus did not say, "...faith as small as a mustard seed..." in today's text, though that's how it's often heard; what He said was, "... faith like a mustard seed..." So, Jesus is not telling you that a small or little faith can make you do impossible things. On the contrary, Jesus often rebuked people, especially His disciples, for having a small or little faith. (cf. Matthew 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, 17:20) No, faith like a mustard seed can make you do impossible things.

So, just what is it about the mustard seed? Elsewhere, Jesus told a parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches." (Matthew 13:31-32) Jesus used a bit of Rabbinical hyperbole here to illustrate a point. While small, a mustard seed actually isn't the smallest seed in the world. While most mustard plants aren't some grand trees or bushes in which birds can grow, they all grow into large plants in comparison to the size of the seeds. And that's the point! A mustard seed doesn't just remain a seed, but grows into a plant that you wouldn't expect from such an otherwise insignificant seed. In fact, mustard doesn't only grow big over the ground, as Jesus described, but under it, too, with a deep taproot.

That's what faith is supposed to be. It is planted in you like a seed, which sprouts and grows, rooted deep in the Word of God, growing beyond what might be expected compared to what was planted. It is an amazing thing, *bound* to produce good fruit—that is, good works—in abundance, in over abundance, on the scale of telling a mulberry tree to replant itself in the ocean, or telling a mountain to move from one place to another. That's the hyperbole, and why there aren't oceans filled with mulberry trees. And this is the point of the hyperbole: your faith should not remain little or small, which is rebuked, but sprout and grow, and by God's providence it does just that!

Faith like a mustard seed can only do great things because of its object. Being rooted deep in the Word of God makes for a faith that does amazing things, on impossible levels, such as saying, "Jesus is Lord," or, as Jesus continued in today's Gospel, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty." This faith takes hold of Jesus, its object, and takes Him captive to His promises, so that by this faith you repent of your sins, and by this faith you receive forgiveness. That is the life of a Christian: repentance and receiving absolution. When you have done this, you have done your duty—and this only by God-given faith like a mustard seed—and what an amazing, mustard-seed-to-mustard-plant-like duty it is! It is the power to overcome in the struggle against hypocrisy.

That is the mountain that is moved with faith like a mustard seed, the mulberry bush that is uprooted and planted in the sea: overcoming in this struggle against hypocrisy. With faith like a mustard seed, you can say, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." (cf. Mark 9:24) With faith like a mustard seed, you can repent of your sin, even when rebuked, and receive absolution. All of this God gives you for the sake of His Son, who was crucified for your transgressions and risen again to give you life. Of all the things, that is what your mustard-seed-faith clings to most; that is the object of your faith: Christ and Him crucified. For Christ's sake, repentance is free and absolution is free!

Therefore, you brood of vipers. Jesus loves you. You say you have Abraham as your father. By God's grace, you do. You present yourselves as being righteous before God. By Jesus' sacrifice, you are. You lift yourselves up as an example of righteous living. By the Spirit's leading, you are free to do so, because you have been given faith like a mustard seed, and so you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.