

FAITH and SERVICE

Luke 17:5-10 [MW19-18]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 06 October 2019

Make our faith stronger ...

- wouldn't that be great
zap! kapow! take this pill and your faith is doubled, trebled, increased ten-fold
- yes that would indeed be great

In Luke chapter 17, verse 5 the disciples say to Jesus: Make our faith stronger!

- no please, no polite asking, it's a demand
in my translation the words are followed by an exclamation mark
they're shouting
- MAKE OUR FAITH STRONGER!!!

Of course, we would never do that would we ...

- we would never *demand* that Jesus do something for us
never expect God to deliver *instantly*
- who am I kidding

Once again the disciples missed the bus, or may be that should be missed the boat

- but on the other hand, in one sense they were right on to it
Christian life, being a follower of Jesus, is hard
- it is no walk in the park, no cup of tea and chocolate cake
or as former All Black Tana Umaga once famously said:
we're not playing tiddlywinks
- this is really, really difficult, the disciples are saying
we need a little help here Jesus!

Jesus has just laid down real heavily, at the beginning of chapter 17

- what is required of those who would follow him:
don't cause others to sin
protect the vulnerable little ones
rebuke those who are going astray
forgive anyone who asks for forgiveness – even if they've treated you really badly

You can just imagine those disciples stopping in their tracks

- blooming heck, this is going to be tough, tougher than we imagined
not sure if we're up to it ... we want to be but, Jesus
you need to make our faith stronger

The disciples are right in recognising they need help

- right in recognising that they are not able to do this in their own strength
and they are wrong in asking for a quick fix

Now I think the disciples have got a case, they've got a point

- so let's see how Jesus responds
Jesus, friend of sinners, welcomer of the outcasts
help of the helpless
- what does this Jesus say???

If you had faith no bigger than a tiny mustard seed, you could tell this mulberry tree to pull itself up, roots and all, and to plant itself in the ocean. And it would!

This is a slap in the face with a wet fish

- Jesus is telling the disciples they don't even have miniscule faith because if they did have even just a tiny, tiny, tiny amount of faith ... and this incredible image of a huge tree being uprooted and planted in the sea
- it's ridiculous, and it's meant to be but how does that help us twenty-first century disciples? does it help us even?

Now I'm the first to admit I don't have the kind of faith that moves full grown trees

- so how do I increase my faith? do I need to increase my faith? does it depend on me, on anything I do anyway?
- well, no ... and yes

It seems the point is not that I, or the disciples, need more faith

- rather we need to understand that faith enables God to work in our lives in ways that defy ordinary human experience
- it has nothing to do with being able to do miraculous works or spectacular tricks
- Jesus assures the disciples, and you, and me that with even a little faith we *can* live by his teachings on discipleship

Great! I'm pleased that's cleared up

- so we are on the way to getting things sorted getting on with living as Jesus calls us to live, by: not being a hindrance to the discipleship of others protecting the little ones correcting those who are going astray and forgiving as we ought
- and maybe we are even making a pretty good fist of it

Then verses 7 to 10 come along

- Jesus' words seem a bit harsh and, to put not too fine a point on it: blunt huh? what is going on here?
- I think Jesus is responding to the disciples, and our, natural human expectation that because we have done the right thing, because we have acted appropriately somehow we will receive something good
- maybe you don't see things like this but if I'm honest, I can see myself here

If I've done a good job, done what I'm supposed to and done it well

- I'm kind of expecting something not a "reward" exactly, but some kind of positive recognition
- Jesus has set the standard for being a disciple very high to have got anywhere near it is worthy of merit isn't it???

Apparently not – Jesus bursts my bubble

- lets the air out of my tyres, pulls the rug out from underneath me and, having done a bit of thinking on this, it kind of makes sense I can see why

It's all about grace, or actually the reverse side of God's grace

- you see God owes me nothing for living a good Christian life
God's favour and blessing are matters of grace and cannot be earned
- if I assume I can deal with God on the basis of what God owes me I am very sadly mistaken
because then I have rejected grace
and based my relationship on my own worth and merit
- and before God I have none – that's the sobering reality check
grace, by definition, is a free gift
and it goes both ways

Whew! Let's take a break for a minute and I'll tell you a story about an oak seedling:

A small oak seedling was growing in the forest. It looked around and saw that some seedlings turned into great oak trees while others became no more than little shrubs. The trees were strong and beautiful. The shrubs were weak and ugly.

One day the forest ranger was passing through.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ranger, will you help me grow into a great tree?" the seedling asked.

"Do you really want that?" the ranger asked. "It will be a very painful process, one that will require great patience and incredible discipline. It is much easier to just be a shrub."

"No," the seedling replied, "I really want to be a great oak tree. I don't care what it costs in time and patience. I don't care how difficult it is. To be an oak tree is my only desire."

Every day when the ranger came the seedling's way, he poked at the soil, forced the seedling to stand straight and even pulled off some of his leaves and branches. Sometimes when other seedlings were close by, the ranger uprooted them and left the seedling all alone.

One day the seedling complained, "Why do you treat me so harshly? Why don't you let me do what I want to do? Why must you prune my branches, poke my soil, restrict my friends? Why can't you just let me be?"

The ranger replied, "There is only one way to be an oak tree. Because I want to help you, I must cause you some pain. That is the way of growth. Without pain you will be nothing more than a shrub, never a full grown tree."

In a sense being a disciple of Jesus is similar to becoming a tall, strong, flourishing oak tree

- and when we have done that, with all the extra effort, trials and tribulations
Jesus says we have done nothing special
we have merely done what we are supposed to do
- be content with that

Be content with that?

- yes indeed
for the point is that followers of Jesus can be great disciples, through faith
but they can never do more than God requires
- the sobering reality is we cannot do it on our own
we cannot even meet the basic, entry level requirements of discipleship
from our own goodness and strength
- only through faith, allowing God to work through us
are we able to protect the little ones, be good examples, rebuke and forgive

When we have done that, when we have done what we are supposed to do

- to use a word which is not very popular today but is a good thing and exactly fits the bill: "duty"
- we have done our duty that's what we are to do as disciples, followers of Jesus, our duty
- the motive of a disciple is not to gain reward or avoid punishment the motive of a disciple is duty

We are to do our duty, practice our faith and leave it at that

- and what is our duty as disciples? Jesus outlines three things:
- first: to make sure our words and our actions are life-giving and do not lead or cause others to sin
- secondly: to correct those who are going down the wrong path or acting badly and alongside this forgive everyone who asks for our forgiveness
- and thirdly: having done all this, not to assume we have done more or better than we are required to do

For shorthand, a rule of thumb - "FFH"

- faithfulness, forgiveness, humility that last one, humility, reminding us to recognise our true standing before God
- is why Jesus said:
*When you've done all you should, then say,
"We are merely servants, and we have simply done our duty"*

Now that could kind of take the wind out of your sails

- or it could be our encouragement to actually do our duty as disciples Bible Scholar R. Alan Culpepper says that humility is actually harder than faith or forgiveness
- he writes:

... lack of humility is the more dangerous temptation. It prevents us from experiencing the depth of God's love for us. It may also lead us to develop just the kind of self-righteousness and false spiritual superiority that will become an obstacle to the "little one". Spiritual health requires an awareness of both our own sinfulness and God's unlimited love for us.

After all that we may well wish to stand with the disciples and say

- not, Jesus make our faith stronger!
but, Jesus make our path easier!!!
- however there is no easy path, no shortcut just like that oak, to stand, to grow tall, to flourish
- we are to show FFH ... faithfulness, forgiveness, humility in what we think, in what we say, in what we do

This is not easy but it is our duty

- we *can* do it and it makes all the difference