

October 10, 2010
Pentecost 20

"Cheer Up, Christian, You Are a Servant"

LUKE 17:1-10

Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. ² It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. ³ So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴ If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." ⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶ He 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. ⁷ "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸ Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? ⁹ Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰ 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.'"

It is not too often that I have an opportunity to preach a sermon on the same day that my wife and I are celebrating our wedding anniversary. One of the joys or blessings of marriage is learning how to serve each other or to put your marriage partner first, ahead of yourself. I read once about a man and woman who had been married over fifty years. Every month they would celebrate the anniversary date of their marriage by remembering each other on that day. It may have been a flower from the garden, a kind word, a package of gum, usually something small that showed their love for each other. In a Christian marriage where two people love each other out of love for Christ there is always the desire to love the other person and serve the other person as Jesus has served us.

As we listen to Jesus speak to us this morning we hear him describe our service to him as a joyful service that goes on 24/7. This service goes beyond serving the members of your family. It reaches out to other Christians and to members of the community who may not be believers. In the *Small Catechism* Martin Luther describes this joyful service with these words, "Christ had redeemed me a lost and condemned creature...that I might be his own and serve in his kingdom in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness."

The Lord provides opportunities for tough service

It can be real hard to serve other people and put their needs ahead of your own. This is true in your marriage, your family, with other Christians who are weak. It is also true with people who do not care about Jesus and the blessings he offers. Consider how hard it is to avoid doing things that drag another person down or even lead them into sinful thinking and behavior. Jesus said, "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin."

Let me give you an example of a dad who led his son into sinful behavior that eventually cost the young man his life. During my college days I worked on the railroad with some rough talking and hard drinking railroad workers. There were two brothers on the crew, "Little David" and "Iron Mike." Both had serious drinking problems. The story was that their father, who also worked for the railroad, used to take "Little David" with him to the bars when he was 12 years old, gave him beers. The railroad boys would laugh when he got drunk. I came home one weekend from college and my mother said, "Did you hear what happened to Little David who worked with you on the railroad?" He had too much to drink one night, fell asleep while smoking a cigarette in bed, and died of smoke inhalation when the bed started on fire.

I am sure you know of cases where parents did not provide a good example to their children. One mother said, "I am not going to take my children to church because I want them to make up their own minds when they get older." In a fit of anger a father told his son, "You'll never amount to anything." Have you ever caused someone to sin because of your anger outburst? Have you ever grumbled and complained about things in such a way that you dragged someone down instead of pointing them to blessings we have in Jesus? Have you ever failed to give a word of encouragement to someone or just listened to them because you were so intent on talking about yourself and telling your story? Opportunities to show kindness and love to people abound every day. Galatians tells us, "Therefore, as we have opportunity let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers." There is no end of opportunity to help people.

I think of being thrown into the ocean with a millstone around my neck. How many times haven't I failed to be there for people or led them astray by my poor example. But I have the blood of Jesus that forgives me of all my past sin and so do you. I can escape the judgment to come because the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses me from all. Jesus tells us in John 15, "You are clean through the word I have spoken to you." It was Jesus who said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." His forgiveness, his peace, his death and his resurrection bring joy back into my life whenever I realize I have deserved a millstone around my neck for failing people who were looking to me support and encouragement.

Do you want to hear about another tough job that faces you every week of your life on this earth? Jesus says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent' forgive him." To rebuke someone is to tell them that they are on the wrong path and they are endangering their life with sin. The soldier who yells at his buddy and tells him, "Stop, don't take another step, there is a bomb ahead of you" is doing his buddy a tremendous service. He is protecting his life. Listen to another verse from Galatians that tells us how we can serve other people and protect them from danger. "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." If you see your buddy getting into the use of drugs and excessive use of alcohol, would you not want to warn of the danger? If you see your children or husband or wife digging a deep hole of sin would you not want to warn them, even if they do not want you to say anything to them? If you are exposed to someone who is not teaching God's Word correctly, would you not be compelled by love to show them where they are wrong? This is part of taking up our cross and following Jesus.

Then there is the matter of offering forgiveness to someone who has personally hurt you. Even if they come back to you seven times and repent, Jesus says that we are to show them the forgiveness the Lord has for them and the forgiveness that we have for them. The Lord's Prayer is so simple and direct for us. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who sin against us." Think of all the times you have had to say to someone, especially your marriage partner, "I am sorry." Remember what Jesus prayed as he was being nailed to the cross. "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

Corrie ten Boom lived with a smoldering anger for the Germans after WW2. At one of her lectures about surviving a concentration camp, she met a guard who had beaten her sister Betsy. He extended his hand and asked for her forgiveness. She was reluctant but then prayed, "Lord Jesus help me forgive this man." Her hand went out to him and said, "I forgive you." Later she recalled how the forgiveness she had in the Lord had given her the strength and power to forgive.

The Lord provides strength and joy for tough service

Jesus disciples were taken back by Jesus demands for serving. That is why they asked Jesus, "Increase our faith." This reminds us of the man who said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Jesus then tells us about the miracle of faith, even faith as small as a mustard seed. "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." If I have a beautiful carved wood box with gold coins or a crumpled paper bag such as this the value of the gold coins remains the same. So it is with faith. The dying thief on the cross turned to Jesus at the last minutes of his life. He was given the same blessing of Paradise as the people who believe all their lives. Faith is the hand that takes hold of Jesus. This past week at our Santa Maria Terrace Bible Study we heard about the faith of Abraham. It says in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham believed and the Lord credited it to him as righteousness. He believed that one of his descendants would bless the whole world. That simple faith in his Savior credited him with Jesus' and his righteousness, just as your faith and mine takes hold of Jesus and his righteousness. "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

What an amazing miracle the Lord is able to perform in your life and mine. First, he convicts us of our sin by opening our eyes to see the depth of corruption in our heart. He shows us the lack of righteousness that exists to be accepted by a holy and righteousness God. Then he creates the miracle of trusting in Jesus' righteousness as our hope of being love by God now in this life and for all eternity. At times that faith may be weak, at times it is strong. It is even there when we are not thinking about it. It may look like a mustard seed, but it has the power to take a hold of Jesus and the forgiveness he has to offer us.

Jesus said that if we had faith like a mustard seed we could uproot a mulberry tree and plant it into the sea. We could take that large cedar tree outside our church and plant it in the ocean west of the Guadalupe Dunes, if that is what our Lord commanded us to do. The Lord gives us some amazing promises that we can put or trust in during times of crisis and when we are overwhelmed by this tough job of serving other people. He says to us, "So do not fear, for I am with you, do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

And so we can say, with the faith Jesus gives me, "I am going to cheer up and joyfully serve him this coming week." Jesus compared this "just do it" attitude to a servant coming home from working the field or tending sheep. He does not come home and expect the master to serve him,

nor does he comes home and serve his master first before feeding himself. If you put in a hard week this past week at your job, did your boss say to you, "I see you are working hard. Take next week off." No there is more working waiting for you on Monday. In today's economy do you realize how many people would jump up and down for joy to have had hard week last week, and another hard week this? Being a servant for Jesus is not easy, but it is a joy and a privilege when you know him as your King of kings and Lord of lords. It is a joy when you know that the One asks you to serve will also strengthen and increase your power to serve. With the disciples we join in saying cheerfully, "Lord, increase our faith." Amen.