



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
17th Sunday after Pentecost: October 6, 2019
Sermon Title: "Lord, Help Us Grow"
Gospel: Luke 17:3-10

When our younger daughter was probably four years old, she was banging on a piece of furniture. Not wanting her to damage it, I asked her to stop it. She kept doing it, and I told her again. And again. Finally, exasperated, I exclaimed, "I don't want to see you do that again!" Without missing a beat, she retorted, "if you don't want to see me do it, don't look at me!"

What do we do when someone keeps doing something damaging to us? Or keeps saying offensive things? Or keeps lying to us? Or constantly crosses boundaries, or continues to take advantage of us, or even takes from us? Should we even be expected to forgive such repeated things? Is it even possible? It's really tough to keep forgiving. How do we get the place Jesus tells us to go? It perhaps seems like a super human feat.

Originally when I started working on this sermon I imagined how hard it is to forgive really big losses. But isn't it equally challenging, and far more common perhaps, to be asked to forgive smaller things over and over and over? Each time you have to try to let go again. Each time, it's a new pain. And this time reminds of the last time. And the time before.

It's why the disciples beg Jesus, "Lord, increase our faith!" Because he's been talking about sin and repentance and forgiveness, saying even if seven times every day a person sins against you, you should be prepared to forgive them. I'm sure they're thinking, "I hope you don't really expect all that, Jesus." It's not surprising at all that they proclaim that they and their faith don't feel up to it.

So Jesus tells them about a mulberry tree and a mustard seed. For those of you who are not up on your horticulture, the mulberry tree can grow upwards of 30 feet tall, and its canopy of leaves can grow equally as wide. Its root system which grows horizontally, grows equally as broad too. Imagine a vast and intertwining root system like that. It's not just big, it's invasive. Who on earth can just yank that out of the ground? Only a superhero could. And who on earth can forgive like Jesus teaches and commands? Only a super Christian.

But not me.

When we have been hurt, as we hold onto that pain, it takes root and intertwines around our hearts, until we feel root-bound. We feel even more pain as sin deceives us into believing that we have to control by only focusing upon punishing the other. It's why Jean Pierre Caussade describes living in faith as "an untiring pursuit of God, through all that disguises or disfigures God."

If we imagine trying to uproot that mulberry tree Jesus talks about, we can imagine getting splinters, and branches smack us in the face, and dirt flies. We know it will be complicated. Maybe we shake our heads saying, "you can't expect ALL of this! That's it- I'm done!" Just when we think we're done, there's more. Every so often we hear about some heroic virtuous person and admire them, but in our hearts, we can't imagine achieving the same thing. Honestly, we look at how large this task is, and we feel small. Lord, we don't have enough. Lord, we are not enough!

Yet, when I have listened to people talk about their real struggles to forgive, and keep at it, I've heard a mother share that forgiveness "is not a once and done thing, it's a lifelong process." Or someone say he made an immediate choice to forgive in principle, but "it took me years until I could feel I really meant it inside." Or another say that without faith and community support, "there is no way I would have made it through." But one thing they had in common was also speaking of how much relief there was to let it go and how they grew.

Today we welcome new members into our community to grow with us. Today's gospel doesn't seem like a great membership incentive. Life will not always be easy. We have just begun living into Christ's teaching and we continue to live into it, through all the times we want to quit, or walk away. Even through all of the times when it would be easier to just exclaim, "there's not enough in this life to do this." There is no doubt about it, that what Jesus commands is not easy. We want some massive response to our struggles. God responds with giving us faith. It seems so tiny, an almost imperceptible thing. When you and I envision faith as limited to what we talk ourselves into intellectually, it's no wonder it feels small.

But our faith is a much deeper, more powerful thing. It is the seed of a relationship of trust, and of allegiance that can grow, given and tended by a God who won't let us down. This God sent Jesus to show us such a life, amidst struggles and pains, and mistakes and doubts. Jesus got let down a lot. The ultimate sign of forgiveness through pain is the cross of Christ for us.

It's the sign of a God who knows- Who is anguished with us and loves us. Who forgives us and wants us to be healed.

God gives us that seed of faith in our baptism and gives faith in community to nurture and sustain us in this life of repentance and forgiveness and loving one another. Together we remember that repentance doesn't mean that there is no accountability. And it's not an unrealistic belief that there are no boundaries on behaviors. Repentance is a heart-felt desire for what we all feel. Wanting things to turn from how they have been- a turning from what has been growing in us and in others, so we can grow differently.

We're encouraged to grow in this way God desires and knows is best for us. And we do not have to wait for someone else to turn and grow before we do. We gather here to live this way together. And Jesus assures us, "You have what you need."

This is not an admonition, but an encouragement. Allow the faith you have been given to work, and to grow, and that tiny seed will grow. Little by little it can displace that mulberry tree tangling up our lives. Trust in the giver of the seed of faith and the community God gives to grow around us. Then follow, however slowly, in quiet, humble, prayerful and persistent trust. God will help us grow and keep at it, even when we feel "oh so small." And Jesus will continue to teach us, and forgive us and love us into life, no matter how big or invasive the mulberry trees in our lives may seem.