

Trinity 16C Luke 17:5-10 02/10/22

Have you ever heard of a “faithquake”? It is something like an earthquake. Something comes along and shakes us up. Something shakes our very foundations. Through that foundation-shaking event, we want to know more about God and faith.

Something like that is going on in our gospel. The apostles cried out, “Increase our faith” (Luke 17:5). In the front side context of this verse we hear the foundation-shaking words of Jesus about forgiveness which prompted this cry for more faith. “Be on guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive” (Luke 17:3). These words about forgiveness were a faithquake for the apostles. They were all shaken when they heard them. “We just don’t have enough faith to understand what you are saying,” they were saying as they pleaded for more faith. And the Lord says in reply if you had faith as a grain of mustard seed you could uproot a tree and plant it in the sea!

Even if we’ve heard these words about forgiveness many times before, these words shake us up, too. Questions abound from our smaller than mustard seed faith: “Seven times a day? Are these repeated sinners really repentant or are they just saying the words? Are they going to change their ways? How can we forgive that often?”

Our foundations are shaken, too, as we hear about forgiveness. Strained relationships in families, with friends, and at church make the task of forgiveness seem impossible, especially when we know what the numbers “seven,” “seventy-seven,” and “seventy times seven” mean.

The numbers “seven,” “seventy-seven,” and “seventy times seven” have nothing to do with arithmetic. Seven is the perfect number in the Bible. Seven is the number of days in creation. Seven means “whole” or “complete.” Seven came to be the number which the Hebrews associated with being like God.

In our story, the use of numbers means that we should act like God acts, willing to restore someone who has sinned against us over and over again. If there is repentance and forgiveness, reconciliation is possible. The key word here is “if.” “If” is the biggest little word in the English language. “If ... he sins ... and if he repents” is the key which opens the door to the forgiveness factor.

Consider three elements in the forgiveness factor. The first is that repentance must be present for forgiveness to take place. Often when people say, “I’m sorry,” they mean, “I’m sorry I got caught” or “I’m sorry it happened.” That’s not repentance. In the Greek New Testament, the Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means “turning around.” That’s different than “I’m sorry I got caught,” or “I’m sorry it happened.”

There are two sides in any conflict. Both must be willing to do something. The person who sinned must be willing to repent. The person who is sinned against must be willing to forgive. Second, Jesus is addressing the situation of the “offendee,” as well as the offender in these

words about the willingness to forgive. In other words, we are called to be like God when our brothers and sisters hurt us, offend us and sin against us. We are called to be willing to forgive, no matter how many times the sins take place. Careful now, this is a revolutionary concept. It's an earth-shaking approach to human relations, a faithquake to our smaller than mustard seed faith.

Third, being willing to forgive doesn't mean that there are no consequences to our sins because God and other people are willing to forgive us. Concretely, if a murderer repents and expects to get off "scot-free" because he is genuinely sorry for his sins, he has not properly distinguished between the law and the gospel. The gospel tells us that God is willing to forgive us and therefore we should be willing to forgive one another. The law tells us that there are consequences to our sins.

A murderer told a priest, "I have been converted. I have accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I have repented for my terrible sins and I hope that God will forgive me and that someday I can go to heaven. But I know I must pay the penalty for my sins. My hope is that I will be allowed to pay my debt to society." This murderer distinguished properly between the law and the gospel.

The wife of an alcoholic who continually refuses to face the reality of his actions may be doing him more harm than good. When you tolerate intolerable behaviour, you encourage intolerable behaviour. Confrontation must take place when there are repeated patterns of sinful behaviour as outlined in Matthew 18.

Having a willingness to forgive means being like God. God's arms are wide open for the sinner to return, but God is not mocked. What a man sows, that shall he reap. Many who sin repeatedly are never willing to repent. The way is wide that leads to destruction and some go that way. They bring judgment on themselves by an unwillingness to repent.

There is a story from an unknown source that I heard long ago about an old man named Sam who had three sons: Danny, Johnny, and Samuel. No one in the family ever set foot inside a church as far as anyone could remember. The priest and the others in the church tried for years to interest the family in coming to and being involved with church but to no avail. Then one day, as the story goes, a tiger snake bit Sam. The doctor was called and he did everything he could to help him, but it looked certain that Sam would die from the bite. So, to the astonishment of everyone gathered at his bedside, Sam asked that the priest be called.

The somewhat surprised priest arrived, and after greeting everyone began to pray as follows: "O wise and gracious Father, we give you thanks that in your wisdom you sent this tiger snake to bite Sam. He has never darkened the door of our church and we have no reason to believe that he has, in all his time on earth, ever prayed or even acknowledged that you exist. So now we pray that this experience will be a valuable lesson to him and will lead to his genuine repentance and his acceptance of your Son as his Saviour. "And now, O Father, we pray that you will send yet another tiger snake to bite Danny, and still another to bite Johnny, and a third really nasty one to bite Samuel. For years we have done everything we knew to get them to turn to you, but it was all in vain. It seems, therefore, that what all our work could

not do, this lowly tiger snake has done. Therefore it seems to us that the only thing that will accomplish your will for this family is tiger snakes; so, Lord, send us bigger and better tiger snakes. Amen.”

We can't control what another person does. We can't make someone else repent. We can only control our own attitudes. When we are offended, the best thing we can do is to be willing to forgive, to offer forgiveness, instead of holding a grudge, living in bitterness, or clinging to resentment. When grudges are held, bitterness, and resentment are like seeds in a garden of discontent. Whether forgiveness ever takes place is dependent on a willingness to forgive by the offended person, and a willingness to repent by the offender. When we are unwilling to forgive, we make the other person's problems, our problems. The willingness to forgive and the willingness to repent are both part of the faith factor.

The apostles said, “Increase our faith,” because they were shaken by Jesus' words about forgiveness. Their smaller than mustard seed faith was exposed. They realised how far from God they were. They sensed they needed to be closer to God if they were to act like God acts in offering forgiveness to sinners. They experienced a faithquake.

The faith factor means that we change our orientation from the ways of this world to the ways of God's kingdom. Sometimes it takes another person's strong words about what is really important to wake us up. That's what happened to the apostles. Having to face our sins helps us see the need for our Saviour.

The faith factor means that we give up control of our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. We seek to do what God wants us to do, instead of stubbornly clinging to what we want to do. Submitting to Jesus Christ as Lord is the one thing needed and the hardest thing of all.

The faith factor means that we seek to act the way Jesus acted. Since he forgave people, we are called to forgive. Since his arms were always outstretched to sinners, we should also be willing to forgive. Amen

Fr Robert Newton