

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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Sermon, October 2, 2022

Luke 17: 5-10

Wow, we must not have very much faith. Jesus says you can move trees around with just a little bit of faith. So, if we were real Christians then maybe somebody could say to us, “Honey, could you please move that oak tree. It’s blocking my view of the sunset.” “Sure, here.” And we would move the oak tree about fifteen feet to the left. “No, it doesn’t have to be that far. Move it back a little bit.” So, we move it again. “That’s right, thank you, honey.” “No problem.”

Is that what Jesus means in the Gospel lesson for today? Or might he be talking about something bigger than just a mulberry tree?

In the verses before the Gospel lesson for today, Jesus makes some difficult demands on his disciples. He says, first, that we are to be careful not to cause one of “these little ones,” either children or vulnerable people, to sin. That is, to refuse to love themselves, other people, creation or God. In addition, we are supposed to call each other out if we find each other refusing to love ourselves, our neighbors, creation or God. That’s demanding because nobody likes to ruffle feathers in the church. Nobody wants to cause conflict in the family. Nobody wants to make a ruckus at work or in society. Much easier just to keep quiet. Nevertheless, Jesus says, call it out.

And if someone repents and asks for forgiveness, we are to forgive. Repentance is not fashionable these days. Forgiveness does not look cool on our resume. But that’s how we deal with a chaotic world. That’s how we Christians deal with a world that is violent and tragic, beset by cruelty and pride and lies. Watch out that you don’t cause others to forget to love. Call them out when they do forget to love. Forgive when they repent.

No wonder the disciples at the beginning of our passage, say, “Increase our faith.” They’re going to need it.

Jesus says, basically, “If you have the tiniest little bit of faith, even faith the size of a mustard seed, you can do wonders. You can make a mulberry tree move and be planted in the ocean.” A mulberry tree is a fruit-bearing tree. It grows these berries that look like blackberries, but they’re richer and deeper and darker. Not tart like a blackberry. Jesus says we can take that fruit-bearing tree and plant it in the ocean, the symbol for chaos in Jesus’s world. The symbol for what it’s like when everything is falling apart, when people do not listen to or respect each other, when evil seems to win.

In other words, Jesus says, with even a little bit of faith, we can bear fruit in the midst of a chaotic world. That’s just what we do.

He says a slave does his job because that’s just what the slave does. This last bit of the Gospel lesson for today has been badly misinterpreted. It was used to tell people kidnapped from Africa and carried into slavery in North and South America, “Shut up and work.” It was used similarly against women. “Stay in your place, shut up and work.” But that’s not the point of the passage.

The point of the passage is that we don’t get any special stars in our crown for bearing fruit in a chaotic world. We don’t get any extra shine on our tiaras. Jesus is saying, “This is simply what we do.”

When I was about eleven years old, my friend, I’ll call him Larry, showed me the biggest mulberry tree I have ever seen. We crossed Highway 90, rode our bikes deep into old Ocean Springs, where the live oaks grow their branches so long and bend their branches so low to the ground that they grow roots on their own. Larry brought us to this mulberry tree where we climbed up into its branches, fifteen, twenty feet up and picked the fruit.

Then we brought it back to his mother. Larry was always bringing food back to his mother. He brought bamboo shoots we got from the country club grounds. He brought poke weed, which, don’t every eat any of a poke weed because the whole thing is poison. But if you take just the new leaves close to the ground, they’re edible,

but don't because you might get a leaf that's grown old enough to have poison in it. He'd bring fish home. His mother would cook it all.

I think Larry was trying to bear fruit in the midst of chaos, because things weren't quite right at home. I overheard his father hitting Larry's hand with a stick because he had left it out in the back yard. Two or three times he hit his hand. Something chaotic. Larry was trying to bear fruit.

We do the same. We may be imperfect, even powerless, like Larry was. But we do the same, because that's what Jesus did. He came into our chaos at the cross and brought the love of God to us there. When our bodies are giving out, we still try to show kindness to the people around us, and we still pray. When work is crazy, we still try to stand up for what is right. When misinformation and nasty feeling flows through our world, we still speak the truth. When despair bows us down, we still try to show love. It's simply what we do.

Even when we have faith the size of a mustard seed, a tiny shred, we can do miracles, we can bear fruit in the midst of chaos. Thanks be to God.