

UN-TWISTED

Sermon, October 6, 2019

Texts: Luke 17:1-10; II Timothy 1:1-14

The sermon title is sort of a takeoff on the title of a 2004 Ashley Judd and Samuel Jackson movie ("Twisted"), a really dark movie I've really only read about and heartily do NOT recommend.

"Wriden" is an old Anglo Saxon word which means "to twist, to torture" ... we have at least four words in the English language that stem from that one Anglo-Saxon root. Those words are *wreath*, *writhe*, *wrath*, and *wraith*. A *wreath* is a set of branches twisted in upon themselves in a circle. To *writhe* is to twist in pain and agony. *Wrath* is a word for anger, but it also carries a connotation of being twisted and distorted and red in the face with rage! *Wraith* is an old word for ghost, but it's a particular kind of ghost ... a wraith is a ghost doomed to a tortured existence, restless for eternity, and is a particularly wrathful, twisted spirit (*some of you remember the Ringwraiths in Lord of the Rings ... haunting, dark, tortured spirits riding about*). *Wrath*, *wreath*, *writhe*, *wraith* ... all carry the connotation of something twisted, contorted, tortured, something bent out of shape, bent out of its proper original shape, something distorted from what it was created to be.¹

Well, in a nutshell, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about UN-twisting. It is about restoration, it's about a faith that UN-twists, straightens lives out, helps people be who they were created to be, now and forever. (That's pretty much my sermon this morning, but I'll continue with the rest of it anyway.)

In the lectionary Gospel reading from Luke, the disciples requested, "Lord, increase our faith!" Now, we can all sympathize with the disciples' request, as Jesus has been teaching them some rather hard things about sin and faith and forgiveness. Things like, "Woe to that person who causes someone to sin, especially little ones! 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, so watch yourselves!" The proper liturgical response to that verse is ... "Yikes!" That should scare the socks off those parents or teachers or grandparents or aunts and uncles or anyone who has contact with children. He said it would be better for a person to have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea to drown ... sort of the Sea of Galilee version of cement shoes ... rather than cause a child to sin. That might sound like an extreme sentence to be carried out for contributing to the delinquency of a minor, but Jesus is deadly serious ... He says causing and/or leading others to sin, especially younger others, is a serious matter! One of the blessings and burdens of responsible adulthood is that little ones trust and imitate us far more than we can ever fully realize. Even apart from the threat of a millstone, any conscientious adult has the sinking dead weight of guilt in our conscience when we realize how we may have caused hurt and difficulty for others, especially those we love, and doubly especially the younger ones. Now, we all communicate "Do as I say, not as I do" to our children in one way or another, and sometimes, that's not such a bad thing. We hope our children won't make the same mistakes we made in life, and we want them to do better than we did, so it makes sense that we want them to do some things differently. And we want to set good examples of integrity and honesty and thrift and faithfulness, but the reality is that more often than not, they imitate us, good habits AND bad ... I feel the millstone of regret more than I care to admit, as does any parent in their more honest moments.

And then on the heels of that ominous warning, Jesus then lays this on the disciples: "If a person sins against you, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him. Even if he just turns around and does it again, and apologizes again, forgive him! Even if he does that seven times in one day, forgive him!" If the disciples are anything like us, I'm sure they are all thinking, "How in the world do I do that, Jesus? And if that person just keeps doing it, again and again and again and again and again and just keeps saying, 'I'm sorry,' well ... how can I be THAT forgiving? I'll probably just want to punch his lights out! That sort of thing just gets me ... angry! Wrathful! Twisted!"

WRATH, *wreath*, *writhe*, *wraith* ... again, all carry the connotation of something twisted, something contorted, tortured, something bent out of its proper original shape, something distorted from what it was created to be. And again, in a nutshell, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about restoration, UN-twisting, straightening lives out, helping people be who they were created to be, now and forever. If we sin and lead others into sin, and/or if we hold onto anger, these things can and do have a twisting, distorting, lessening effect on us ... so it is good to strive to be better, it is good to be more consistently faithful, it is good to try and let anger go, it is good to forgive ... if for no other reason than it benefits us. But that's

¹ <http://lingwe.blogspot.com/2007/06/writhe-wroth-writen-wraith-and-ring.html>

often easier said than done, especially when it comes to being thoroughly consistent and faithful role models AND when it comes to handling repeat offenders in our lives! So the disciples are thinking, "How can I do all this, Jesus?" That's the context for them saying, "Lord, increase our faith!"

We are told Jesus then responds to the disciples' request by saying, "If you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." And then, Jesus launches into this thing on the importance of being an obedient and dutiful servant, a subject that appears to be rather random and disjointed from the subject at hand. However, it's not as disjointed as it appears. I think Jesus is saying that the problem is not their lack of faith; according to Jesus, just a bit of faith is all that is really needed to work wonders. The problem might just be their lack of action! If they were just dutifully doing what they ought to be doing, consistently serving as they ought to be serving, then they just might see the increased faith they are seeking. If they would put their faith into measurable action, in matters large and small, wonders would transpire! To slightly misuse Jesus' metaphor, if they would stop going around and around the "mulberry bush" that's right in front of them and deal with it, directly, in faith, putting their faith to work, amazing things might result!

On a related note, I've had a little poster in my office washroom for over twenty years which has a picture of an Alpine mountain range with the following caption: "God sometimes moves mountains one pebble at a time." This little poster encourages and inspires me to be faithful in "moving pebbles" ... to try to be consistently and dutifully faithful in all things, no matter how small and/or apparently insignificant. I believe Jesus is implying in so many words that it is unproductive at best and deadly at worst to sit around twiddling our thumbs asking God to give us more faith so we can do the things we really should be doing anyway, right now in the day and hour we have, with the faith and resources we already got! What we need to do is to start with what we have, doing what we know we ought to do even in the smallest duties (*setting a great example and role model for others to follow, by the way, which lessens the "millstone effect"!*) and *then*, Jesus implies, watch your faith grow and watch the mountains move! Faith is a muscle that grows when exercised. Left unused, it just atrophies. By the way, after a while, atrophied muscles hurt and make you miserable; this is admittedly speculation, but perhaps that's why some Christian people can and do become miserable ... they are miserable with the pain caused by the atrophied muscles of unused, under-exercised, faith!

In a rather oversimplified nutshell, I think that's Paul's word for a discouraged and dispirited Timothy. His young protégé is discouraged and at the point of tears, and Paul writes, among other things: "Fan into flame the gift of God that is within you!" The best cure for despondency, Timothy, is put to use the faith God has already given you. Fan the flame YOU already have! (*And don't fret about others lack of flame, by the way, worry about your own ... and then watch your flame ignite others! But that's another sermon!*) To be clear, as Paul reiterates, the Bible tells us faith is a gift from God, a gift I believe each and every one of us here has been given or we wouldn't be here this morning! There is at least a spark of faith in your soul, a spark that yearns to be fanned into a flame, a spark that has drawn you to be in a house of worship this morning. Use it, fan it, make the most of the time and opportunity you have while you have time and opportunity and watch the miraculous happen. The central problem in our lives is not our lack of faith, but that we don't put the faith we DO have into action in the day and opportunity we have! Use what you already got! Do what God calls you to do. And it is the nature of faith to expand and increase and grow as we exercise it and put it to work! Exercise that muscle, no matter how weak and small you might think it is, and watch it grow.

Yes, we can sympathize with the disciples in their request for more faith. We, too, always tend to think we need more faith to do what we really just ought to be doing in the first place. "Oh, if I just had more faith I would be a better Christian, I would be a better parent, a better spouse, a better worker, a better (fill in the blank)." But the problem may not be our lack of faith. The problem may be our lack of action! As we take *affirmative* action, as talked about last week, as we exercise our faith, we will see good things, even miracles, happen! Do what you know to be right and good and proper and loving and honorable, and do it now; 99.9% of us already have what it takes within us by the grace of God to do what we know is right, right now! Don't say, "Someday." Don't say, "I'll get to it." Don't say, "When I'm feeling better or when I have more money (*and by the way, especially as we age, we're never going to feel totally better and we will never have enough money! I've never, ever met a person ... or a church, for that matter ... who has "enough money." We always think we need more!*) or when I have a better job or when it stops raining, then I'll do the right thing." No, **JUST DO IT** ... the sooner, the better! "Increase our faith," the disciples begged. Jesus replied, "Increase your service."

And let the un-twisting begin.