

“LORD, INCREASE OUR FAITH!”

Sermon, October 2, 2022

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

“Wridden” is an old Anglo Saxon word which means “to twist, torment or torture” ... we have at least five words in the English language that stem from that one Anglo-Saxon root. You may remember from the last time we looked at these lectionary texts three years ago (*and I'm sure those of you who were here that Sunday remember every word of that sermon!*) that those five words are wreath, writhe, wrath, wroth and wraith. A *wreath* is a set of branches twisted in upon themselves in a circle. To *writhe* is to twist and contort in pain and agony. *Wrath* is a word for anger, but it also carries a connotation of being twisted and contorted and red in the face with rage! Just as “angry” is an adjective for one who is full of “anger” (noun), “wroth” is an adjective ... it’s a word not used too often nowadays, but one who is “wroth” is “wrath-full”, i.e., full of wrath.. *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 wroth, wrathful, twisted, tormented spirit (*some of you will remember the Ringwraiths in Lord of the Rings ... haunting, dark, tortured, twisted spirits who were shadows of the kings they had been in life, restlessly riding about*).. *Wrath, wroth, wreath, writhe, wraith ... all carry the connotation of something twisted, contorted, tortured, bent out of shape, something distorted from what it was created to be.*¹

Well, in a nutshell, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about UN-wridding, UN-twisting. It is about restoration, it’s about a faith that UN-twists, straightens lives out, helps release people from their torment and help them be who they were created to be, now and forever. That’s pretty much my sermon this morning, but I’ll continue ...to paraphrase Chubby Checker, “*C'mon let's un-twist again, like we did last Sunday.*’

These lectionary New Testament readings call to mind an old story from the rationing days of World War II. A man walked into a diner, sat down at the counter and ordered a cup of coffee. The waitress brought the coffee and set it before him. “Cream or Sugar?” she asked. “Sugar.” he replied. Sugar was rationed at the time, so she reached beneath the counter for the sugar dispenser; gave the dispenser and a spoon to the customer, and watched as the man poured two heaping teaspoonfuls of sugar into his cup. Giving the coffee just a slight stir, he sipped his coffee, and apparently, it wasn’t sweet enough. So he reached for the sugar again. The waitress’s eyes widened in disbelief as he put not one, but two more heaping teaspoons into the cup. As soon as he put the sugar dispenser down, the waitress snatched it away and returned it beneath the counter for safekeeping. Another slight stir, another sip of his coffee, and apparently the customer was still not satisfied, for he asked for the sugar again. With steel in her eyes and indignation in her voice the waitress replied, “*Stir up what you've already got!*”

Stir up what you've already got! I believe that is exactly what Jesus is saying in so many words to His apostles in our Gospel reading when they requested, “*Lord, increase our faith!*” and what Paul is saying to his discouraged young protégé Timothy, when he wrote, “*Fan into flame that spark of faith already in you.*”

The disciples request, “*Lord, increase our faith!*” Now, we can all sympathize with the disciples’ request, as Jesus had just been teaching some rather hard things about sin and faith and forgiveness. Things like, “*Woe to that person who causes someone to stumble or sin, especially little ones! It would be better for that person 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!” Who among us hasn’t wittingly or unwittingly given someone cause to sin and/or stumble? And when Jesus makes it clear that especially includes corrupting younger ones, that should scare the socks off any parent or teacher or youth leader or school board member or ANY adult who has contact with or responsibility for the education of children. He said it would be better for such a person to have a millstone tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea ... sort of the Sea of Galilee version of cement shoes ... 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! 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. 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. We want to set good examples of integrity and honesty and fidelity and faithfulness, but the reality is that more often than not, they imitate us, good habits AND bad ... I mean, I love being a parent, and I have many happy memories from parenthood, but I feel the “millstone of regret” more often than I care to admit, as does

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

any parent in their more honest moments. And then on the heels of that somber and ominous millstone 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, again, again, again, again, again and AGAIN and just keeps saying, 'Sorry (X7),' well ... how can I be THAT forgiving? That sort of thing just makes me .. wrath!"*

WROTH, WRATH, wreath, writhe, wraith ... again, all carry the connotation of something twisted, something contorted, tortured, something bent out of its proper 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 better, not bitter, helping them 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 and refuse to forgive, these things can and do have a twisting, distorting, lessening effect on us ... so it is good to be more consistently faithful, it is good to forgive and let anger go ... if for no other reason than it benefits us. Again, it makes us better, not bitter. But that's often easier said than done. That's the context for the disciples saying, *"Lord, increase our faith!"*

Jesus responds 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 a dutiful servant, a subject that as first reading 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 enough faith; according to Jesus, just a bit of faith is all that is really needed to work wonders. If they would put their faith into measurable action, if they would stir up what they already got, in matters large and small, wonders would transpire! And a good starting place is to ask the three questions raised here by Jesus' teaching: 1. Am I causing others to sin? 2. Am I being completely forgiving? and 3. Am I faithfully doing my duty?

For twenty-five years now I've had in my office washroom a little mini-poster 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 (*and, according to this text, start by watching ourselves that we don't give others cause to sin, and stand ready to forgive, and faithfully do our duty*) and *then*, Jesus implies, watch your faith grow and watch the mountains (*and in this reading, the mulberry trees!*) move! Faith is a muscle that grows when exercised. Exercise that muscle, no matter how weak and small you might think it is, and watch it grow. Left unused, muscles just atrophy ... and eventually die.

In a rather oversimplified nutshell, I think that's Paul's word for a discouraged and dispirited Timothy. His young protégé is 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 work the faith God has already given you. 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 every soul here, a spark yearning to be fanned into a flame, a spark that has drawn you to be in a house of worship today. 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 so much our lack of faith, but that we don't put the faith we DO have into action in the day and opportunity we have! Stir up what you 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, 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. Do what you know to be right and good and proper and loving and honorable, and do it 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!)*, then I'll do the right thing." No, **JUST DO IT** ... the sooner, the better! And watch your faith grow.

"Lord, Increase our faith," the disciples begged. Jesus replied, *"Increase your service."*

And let the un-twisting begin.