

Trust In the Promises of God

Trusting in the promises of God, and in response to God's free gift of faith we are invited to live faithfully through acts of loving kindness, forgiveness, and service.

In the gospel of Luke, we are in the middle of Jesus' teachings on what it means to be a disciple, what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Today we hear a group of four sayings of Jesus. On first reading they can also sound like there are four barely related sayings or mini parables. They can be heard as Jesus scolding his disciples, and by extension scolding us, they can come across as shaming and angry words. An unwanted reminder of how short we fall.

Sometimes, various of the saints such as St Francis of Assisi or Mother Theresa were held up as examples of people of extraordinary faith that we should emulate and measure ourselves against. With them as our benchmark we can wonder if there is any hope for us.

Sadly, some of these verses have been used by some people to control and even justify the abuse of other people.

But ... perhaps these sayings are together for a reason,
and ... perhaps they really offer both grace, hope and encouragement.

The first saying about stumbling and millstones is pretty straightforward, if somewhat graphic.

We all make mistakes, we are all lead into temptation, we all stumble. As Jesus says, that is to be expected, we are human.

But ... the caution comes if we lead or cause another person to sin, particularly if they are what Jesus calls 'the little ones,' if they are new followers of Christ, whether the new follower is a child or an adult; then this is not good. A millstone around our neck, we are told, would be preferable.

The second saying calls on us to forgive another disciple who sins and is repentant, and if they sin and repent often, then we must forgive often. This is not an easy word for most to hear as forgiveness is difficult to practice.

Sadly, this verse has been used to encourage battered wives to stay with their abusive partners. Exhorting forgiveness in such a context is, in Jesus' words causing "one of these little ones to stumble." It is tempting the victim to the sin of sloth of refusing to see themselves as a child of God worthy of love and respect. And Jesus has just said that anyone leading another into temptation will suffer severe consequences.

Which brings us to Jesus' response to the apostles' plea to increase their faith. Jesus responds, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

This is NOT a rebuke. It is an affirmation that you, every one of you, along with the disciples listening to Jesus already have faith. Faith is not quantifiable. You cannot be like the rich man who built new barns to hold all his harvest, sits down rather pleased with himself ready to enjoy a relaxed retirement and dies that night. You cannot accumulate more faith, you cannot stockpile faith.

This much [*fingers pinched together*] the size of a mustard seed is enough.

The faith you have is enough to do the impossible – such as uprooting mulberry trees - and to do the absurd – such as plant the mulberry tree in the sea.

Faith is the sincere trust in the promises of God. If you trust in God, you cannot trust God more.

Finally, we have the troublesome story of the master and slave. The slave comes in from working outside tending sheep or crops and the master tells him to put his apron on and to prepare the master's supper, the slave can eat later.

It is difficult for us to hear a story that accepts the roles of slaves, when we have strived for so long to eliminate slavery. However, we need to put this story into context, to consider how those listening to Jesus would have heard and understood the parable. Most of those listening to Jesus, including the disciples would have known slavery, either directly or through family and friends. It was the normal way of life at the time. It was a way of life that everyone understood, whether they liked it or not, whether they were master or slave. The roles and relationships were well-defined.

The master was responsible for providing the slave with food and lodging, but there was no obligation to give the slave anything else, not even thanks for a job well done. The slave was responsible for doing what they were told.

As the master in the parable owes nothing to the slave, so God owes us nothing. Like the slave knows their job – tending sheep or crops and making dinner – so we know our relationship with God. The difference is that the slave hopes that their master will be a good provider. We are assured that God will provide for us. God comes with a good track record.

As in any household or social group, there are expectations and obligations, there are rights and responsibilities in the community of faith.

As a disciple, a follower of Jesus, in the community of followers we are commanded to live responsibly, forgive generously, believe trustingly, and follow obediently.

All of this is a tall order for frail, imperfect human beings like us. But God in Christ has shown us the way,
and in following we find the blessings of life with God
for ourselves and for the community of God's people.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Readings: Luke 16:1-13