

For the Sake of the Promise
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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2 Timothy 1:1-14

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

2 To Timothy, my beloved child:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

3 I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. ⁴Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. ⁶For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; ⁷for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

8 Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, ⁹who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. ¹¹For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, ¹²and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. ¹³Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

[some sayings of Jesus]

Luke 17:5-10

⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ ⁶The Lord replied, ‘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.

⁷ ‘Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here at once and take your place at the table”? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink”? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” ’

This morning’s reading from Luke is difficult, not difficult to understand like John can sometimes be with his metaphors and twisting use of the same word, but difficult to accept. First we hear about faith the size of a mustard seed uprooting trees into the sea. This has been read by many a person as a benchmark with shame, either self-inflicted or suggested by others. “If I only had more faith, my prayers for a cure would be answered.” “If you had more faith, you would be healed.” Do these sound familiar? We are ashamed that our prayers are not answered in the way we desire because, we assume, our faith is not strong enough for God to desire to respond. If we were more faithful toward

God, so, too, would God be more faithful toward us. Perhaps this is what drove the disciples to ask Jesus to increase their faith. If they were more faithful toward God, God would be more faithful to them – this certainly fits with the beliefs we sense from the Israelites throughout the Hebrew Bible. And we believe this, too, despite the fact that the **whole** of the Bible affirms that God is love and love does not seek to shame us.

Professor Kimberly Bracken Long suggests we ought to hear this reading with ears tuned toward this message of love. She writes, “If we listen again to this exchange with these new ears, we hear Jesus answer the disciples with kindness, and maybe even a bit of a smile. ‘Why, you do not need more faith,’ he says. ‘Even this much faith (his thumb and forefinger pinching together again) is enough!’ If we hear Jesus speak with the voice of love, we hear him telling the apostles that, in fact, they already have enough faith to do whatever is required of them.”¹ This is surely a different reading of this text, one that does not seek to shame them into better behavior.

I would also suggest that we have attached meanings to this reading that are not in the text. I said earlier that we tend to think our prayers might be “answered” if we were more faithful and we cite the mustard seed as support. Listen again, though. “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.” There is nothing in this text that says “if you have even the teeniest faith and pray to God for something you wish to happen, God will make it happen.” When Peter was out on the sea with Jesus, he didn’t begin to sink because God did not answer his prayers. “But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’”² The size of our faith does not correlate with God’s willingness to answer our prayers.

This mustard seed story is not our only difficulty in this reading. Jesus tells a story of the expectations and treatment of a slave and we hear in it not only an endorsement of slavery but an endorsement of thankless treatment of slaves. Again, though, what we hear is not what Jesus said. Professor Oliver Larry Yarborough explains:

Everyone in the Greco-Roman world would recognize that the answer to Jesus’ question [“Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?”] was no. Slaves did what they were commanded; masters were not obligated to thank them. “Enlightened” moralists such as Musonius Rufus and advocates of the more humane laws of the Torah could argue that slaves should be treated well. Masters might even free them for loyal service; but few sought to overturn the system – nor does this parable. Indeed, it makes no comment on the slave system or

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 142.

² Matthew 14:30-31

the master/slave relationship. It simply uses the logic of the system to describe the nature of “what ought to be done.”³

If we can accept this, we can turn our attention toward what was said, over what we may think was implied. Jesus is establishing that slaves are expected to do what is asked of them and excessive gratitude is not a reasonable response to the slave doing what was expected. Today, if you are a manager, you know that you expect those you manage to do their jobs without asking, cajoling, or pampering. Extra praising is given for going **above and beyond** the expectations of a job description. As employees, we consider this part of our work ethic. We think “of course, I’ll do what is expected of me. I do it because it’s my job - not because I hope for a pat on the back every time I complete a task.”

Once Jesus has gotten us to agree that it makes no sense for a master to reward a slave for doing his/her job, he turns the tables and we find we are the slaves who have been asking for thanks for doing what was expected of us when we really should have been saying “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” This brings us to the third difficulty – this language of “worthless.” This word, you must know, can also be translated as unworthy, not worthy. So hear it again, and not as slave to master but as child of God to God: “We are not worthy of your abundant graces; we have done only what we ought to have done!” When we are right in spirit, we do what we do as Christians not to seek a reward for doing what is right but simply because it is what we ought to do.

When we are right in spirit, we do what we do for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus. For Paul, the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus trumped everything else and he was encouraging Timothy to think and behave in this same way. He wrote, “Do not be ashamed...of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel.” Over the course of time, there have not been so many who have taken pride, meaning who have not been ashamed, to be imprisoned for the sake of the gospel. Timothy was not alone in the shame Paul addresses. And, if not that type of shame, have you felt shame in being known by the name of Christian because of the un-Christian behavior of our Christian brothers and sisters? Paul says, “Let neither of those hold you back. Your discomfort, no matter how great, is not stronger than the promise of life in Christ Jesus.”

Paul writes, when you doubt or waver, Timothy, “Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me...Guard the good treasure entrusted to you.” In faith and love in Christ Jesus and with the help of the Holy Spirit, remember the gift of God to you. “God did not give a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” This holds true not only for Timothy but for us also – God did not give a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 143.

and of self-discipline. This power is best used for the sake of the promise of life that is free, life that is abundant, life that is better than we have proven ourselves worthy of, the promise of life in Christ Jesus. We use that power not because we seek the reward of that life, not in order to earn that promise, but because we are grateful and to use that power is what we ought to do. We overcome our discomfort, our shame, for the sake of the promise. We respond for the sake of the promise alone.

Let us pray: Loving God, forgive us for the times when we seek reward from you for doing what we ought, for expecting from you more than the gifts you have given us, the gift of your Son, the gift of life eternal. We are not nearly worthy of these gifts and yet you give them, expecting nothing in return. We offer our humble thanks and our lives in gratitude and pray for the strength to do this every day. Amen.