

Luke 17:1-10

Pentecost 20, Series C, October 2, 2016

Theme: Increase our Faith

I. As we deal with our Christian family

II. As we deal with our sinful flesh

INJ I was a child, and we had a busy day. Several friends had been over to play. They had left now, and the room was a mess. Lego blocks were scattered everywhere with Tinker Toys mixed in. Hot Wheel cars covered every inch of open space, and books were piled in the corner. Mom called: That room had better be picked up in five minutes! Impossible to do? I thought so. I stomped my feet. I let out a wail and refused to start. Soon Dad came to teach me about persistence. If I started with a little bit and worked steadily, it would get done. When the room was picked up, I ran to mother and gloated over my accomplishment. "Fine, now set the table, it is time for dinner." What? Not even a thanks? Shouldn't my brother have to do the table since I picked up the other room? No fair!

The struggles of kids often mirror the struggles of adults. Jesus gave his disciples a monumental task – impossible, even. "Don't cause others to sin. Do always forgive them when they sin against you." Then, he told the disciples not to gloat over their accomplishments, but to serve faithfully. The apostles cried out "Increase our faith!" They knew Jesus would help. So do we. The Lord Christ answers us as we cry out, "Increase our faith – as we deal with our Christian family and as we deal with our sinful flesh."

Jesus said: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves." We cannot avoid sin. The world surrounds us with evil choices. Our flesh seizes every opportunity to rebel. Satan prowls around to tempt us constantly. You sin. I sin. Our families sin. All people sin. No one is untouched by its deadly finger.

Jesus warns us, however, not to cause others to sin. Don't lead one of his little ones, one of those believing children, to doubt God's Word. Death by drowning would be better than making a fellow believer stray from his Savior! Watch yourself so you don't cause them to sin.

Is it really that big a deal? Our families are fertile ground for sins, and we feel them acutely. What does it matter if we allow children to sass adults? If congregation members follow our inconsistent use of God's Word? They will sin anyway! Yet the children of God are watching and

learning from us. We might not want to think about it, but God says that our sin is serious. If I persistently pursue sin, it brings me damnation. When my sin leads another away from the Lord, I put them in danger of hell.

Jesus says, " Watch yourselves." Watch your words. Watch your actions. Watch your desires. Watch your attitude, your body language, your appearance. Do not turn people away from God by your inaction. Do not cause them to sin by your overreaction. Is this an impossible task? Yes, it is. "Lord, increase our faith as we deal with our Christian family."

Jesus wants even more from us. When your family sins against you, do not tear them apart and destroy them. Instead, seek repentance and patiently forgive. " If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

The easiest thing for us to do when we are caught in a sin is to blame others. Point the finger at them and excuse ourselves. We want others to feel bad so we don't have to. Jesus invites us to repent and seek forgiveness for our own guilt. We have his sure promise of grace.

Jesus also wants us to look out for our brother or sister who sins. We should approach them, and rebuke them. Make known personally and privately to them what offends God and what troubles us. In love, we want them to seek forgiveness and to trust God's peace. When repentance is evident, we add our own words of comfort to God's absolution. The family of God works well when we live in repentance and faith.

What about when this sin is repeated? My sister drives me crazy! My brother makes me angry! This happens all the time! Jesus says to keep on receiving their word of repentance and faith. Keep on forgiving them. Even seven times in a day! Let the Law convict of sin. Encourage and motivate with the gospel. Never stop showering forgiveness on the repentant sinner.

Is what Jesus commands from us regarding our Christian family impossible to do? Absolutely. That is why the apostles spoke up and said " Increase our faith!" We also must cry out, " Increase our faith!" By our own determination or desire we cannot avoid sin or forgive – even once, much less repeatedly. Only when the Holy Spirit lives in our heart by faith will we hate sin and avoid it. Only by faith can we forgive from the heart, as God has forgiven us.

Can you picture yourself with the faith it takes to do what Jesus asks? What a sanctified bunch of people we would be, working like a well-oiled machine, living in repentance and faith! Words of comfort, rebuke, assurance and love would flow from our mouths. Lord, increase our faith so we speak and act like your family more and more!

Do you think – if we had that much faith, so much that we did

what Jesus describes – do you think people would notice? Would the church family work together smoothly? Would the community say good things about us? Would people pour through the doors? Would money troubles go away? What great love we could show to each other!

Does God notice our great faith and Christian living? We would like him to pat our back and congratulate us. We wouldn't mind if he gave us special mention and a few perks. The disciples must have been thinking they were amazing, so Jesus shows them and us that faithful living earns no reward. Get rid of the boasting and pride that dwells in your heart! Like the disciples we pray, "Lord, increase our faith as we deal with our sinful flesh."

We like to talk about faith. We want more faith. We want a stronger faith. We want a pure and mature faith, an active faith that bears fruit. Jesus says that the power of faith lies not in our faith, but in the Lord. "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." Wouldn't you love to have a faith that did that?

What kind of faith would it take? Saving faith is always trusting Jesus the only Savior; he is my Savior. The power of faith does not come from anything we contribute to it, not even its size. How do you measure faith, anyway? No, the power comes from the one in whom faith trusts. That mulberry tree would move, not because of my faith, but because the almighty God planted it in the sea. The smallest faith — like a mustard seed — saves, because God does the work. It is God who forgives your sins in Christ. God who washes away your guilt. God gives you the desire and the ability to love and serve and share. As one who trusts God's Son — who has faith — you have all the promises, all the peace, all the power of God. It doesn't matter whether you are hanging on by a thread, or clinging as tightly as possible. God is the power of faith.

Our sinful nature, however, sees all the power of God that works by faith, and wants to coopt it. "If I could move trees by faith, I would be famous! How can I use faith for my profit?" Or, we boast how grand our faith is so that people will praise us. David faced that temptation in our first lesson. He had gathered millions of dollars of materials for the building of the temple in Jerusalem. He had designed the structure and made all the preparations. It was going to be a spectacular building project!

David could have commanded the honor of every person. The people would have been glad to give him glory and praise. No one is better than King David! Do you remember his speech? "Praise be to you, O LORD ... Yours is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours ... But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be

able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.”

None of the glory went to David, all of it went to the LORD. Christian faith expresses itself that way, praising God for his salvation. I suppose that is another way to see sin and our need for a Savior. We so often try to steal attention for ourselves. “Look at me! See what I did? I gave money. I participated. I belong to that church. I am so great!”

Jesus tells a parable that speaks to the way our sinful flesh sets the trap for us. A servant who works hard all day does not expect to be babied, exalted and waited on when dinner time comes. He gets to serve his master the meal. It is like when I was a boy doing my chores. If the play room was picked up, I figured I could get out of doing dishes. It rarely worked. Chores were chores, and no one thanked me for doing them. Jesus says, “So also you, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” Lord, increase our faith as we deal with our sinful flesh! It always wants to steal attention for itself.

Just as the master does not owe his servant a word of thanks, God does not owe us when we produce the fruits of faith. We think we have done well by coming to worship, reading our Bible, making our offerings, loving one another, bringing our children to Sunday School. Look at how well I forgave that one who so grievously sinned against me! Yet these are only our duty. They are not extraordinary, but simply the fruits of faith – our privilege because Jesus has declared us righteous by his blood. Who are we, that we are able to give as generously as this?

“Increase our faith” is perhaps an incomplete request to make of God. Shouldn’t we simply use the faith God has given – even if it is as small as a mustard seed – trusting his power and promises? He forgives all your sins. You know it is true because the tomb is empty. You know it is for you because Jesus says so in Holy Communion. O you of little faith, why are you so afraid? Jesus is your living Savior, who gives you peace.

The Lord is powerful also to produce the fruits of faith in you. He might not plant trees into the sea, but he has planted Jesus in your heart. Feed the faith through the gospel, and the Lord will make you fruitful. Look closely and you will see fruits of faith: a hatred of sin – not only your own, but you don’t want to lead any away from Jesus; a willingness to forgive – even seven times in a day! These are gifts from the Lord. Seeing them moves us to glorify him: Lord, thank you for the faith! SDG Amen.