

Beside the Streams of Babylon

Psalm 137 opens – and closes – with a couple of the most heartbreaking lines in Scripture. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion,” (Ps. 137:1), and “Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks,” (verse 9).

It’s a psalm of exile. God’s people had been uprooted, displaced, carried off to Babylon. And what is mentioned in the last verse of that text had happened to their own children when the Babylonians seized Jerusalem.

The writer of the psalm longs for home. The Babylonian captors mocked God’s people, asking them to sing the songs of Zion while in bondage in this strange, foreign land. How could they? They hung their harps on the poplars in sorrow.

This particular psalm has been turned into a hymn. You can find it in various forms on Google. It’s a sad song. It’s a lament. This lament reminds us that faith is often lived out not in places of ease and comfort, but rather, in the midst of displacement, oppression, and change. The Israelites were forced to navigate life in a foreign land, searching for a faith strong enough to carry them through.

Today, on World Communion Sunday, our siblings in Christ all over the world will gather together at the Lord’s Table. We all come – with different cultures, languages, and histories. Some will gather in grand cathedrals. Others will gather in simple huts, or hidden house churches. Some gather together in peace, while others gather under the threat of persecution. Some come rejoicing, others come lamenting. But we come together – drawn by the Spirit into a community that goes beyond all human borders and boundaries.

And like the exiles in Babylon, we too may ask, “How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?” (Ps. 137:4). How can we remain faithful in a world that feels so heavy? So fractured, so divided, so full of injustice and fear? To answer this question, let’s turn to our Gospel lesson this morning, from Luke 17:5-10. **Read Luke 17:5-10.**

Increase Our Faith!

How do we remain faithful with so much chaos and upheaval surrounding us? That’s the question the apostles want answered, when they cry out, “Lord, increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5). The apostles’ plea is honest. It’s familiar to us. We know what it’s like to face challenges bigger than ourselves. We pray for faith when we hear the doctor’s diagnosis. We pray for faith when the bills start piling up, and there’s too much month left at the end of the money. We pray for faith when our children wander. When they become prodigals – and we haven’t seen or heard from them in years. We pray for faith when violence fills the news.

The apostles aren’t asking for faith in an abstract sort of way. Just prior to our Gospel lesson, Jesus taught His disciples that sometimes things happen in life which

cause people to stumble, but that they shouldn't become stumbling blocks for anyone themselves. He also talks about rebuking a brother or sister in the faith if they sin against them. If they repent, they're to be forgiven – even if they sin multiple times. If they repent, we're called to forgive them.

It's hard to forgive someone – especially someone who's close to us – when they keep sinning against us. Over and over, and we try to forgive, but the pain is still there, just under the surface – even if they really do repent, and stop whatever the sin was. The hurt leaves a scar on our hearts. It's no wonder the apostles begged Jesus, "Increase our faith!" It's not easy! Forgiveness, reconciliation, loving people who wrong us. It takes more than human strength or will. It takes faith.

A Mustard Seed

Jesus answers in a way, that at first glance, almost sounds dismissive, but it's really not. Jesus says, "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," (verse 6). We've seen mustard seeds before. You can buy them at Aldi. I know I've shown them to the kids at least once during Sermon on the Steps.

The mustard seed was one of the smallest seeds known in the ancient world. They are pretty small. But they grow into a bush that stands about twelve feet tall. That's a big bush! Jesus isn't telling the apostles that they need more faith. He's telling them they needed to trust in the power of the faith they already had. Faith isn't about size – it's about direction.

It's about Who it's rooted in. Even a small faith placed in our big God can bring transformation and change! Sometimes we get into a mindset where we think faith has to look heroic. We get our heads stuck on the idea of the martyrs, the Protestant Reformers, and the missionaries who changed the world. Heroes of the faith type people – like in the 11th chapter of Hebrews.

Jesus shows us that the tiniest act of trust – spoken, prayed, lived out – has world-changing power. Faith, in Jesus' view, isn't about quantity. It's about quality. Remember Sarah in Genesis 18? The Lord visited her and Abraham, and when He said she would have a baby in a year, she laughed – and then she lied about laughing (verse 15). Our God is faithful, even when we aren't! See friends, it's not about how much faith we have – it's about what we do with it.

Parable of the Servant

To really make this point, Jesus tells a short parable about a servant. He says:

Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, "Come along now and sit down to eat?" Won't he rather say, "Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink: after that you may eat and drink?" (Lk 17:7-8).

We really need to grasp what Jesus is saying here. The servant has been out plowing the field or tending sheep. The servant comes in, and is told to prepare the master's supper. The guy's been out hard at work, and then is expected to come in, and work hard in the house, presumably while the master has been relaxing inside all day. These two verses in particular were used to justify slavery in our country prior to the Civil War. It sounds upside down to our modern sensibilities.

Jesus continues, "Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty,'" (verses 9-10). Jesus isn't belittling the apostles. He's trying to reframe their understanding of faith. Faith isn't some superpower to be hoarded by us. Faith is a daily posture of obedience and service.

Faith expresses itself in humility and trust – we live as those who belong not to ourselves but to God. All those heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11 – none of them during their lifetimes would have considered themselves to be top-notch, high-level famous religious people. They viewed themselves as small, common, ordinary – just worshipping and following a very big God who always kept His promises. That's pretty different than the televangelists and high-level church folks we know today, isn't it?

Faith isn't about spectacular miracles. It's about being faithful each day in all the small things. Faith to forgive. Faith to show kindness. Faith to serve. Faith to endure exile, displacement – even rejection. And faith to change – ourselves, and also the world around us. I've said before, and I'll say it again, the Church misses the mark if we stay cloistered inside the walls, thinking God's going to whisk us out of here if things get too rough. God loves the world – so much, that He sent His Son to die for it on the cross – and He expects the Church to move out into the world and make what Jesus has done for it fully known!

Faith to Change the World

On this World Communion Sunday, we're reminded that our faith is not a private possession. It is a gift that binds us to one another across races, cultures, genders, and continents. At some point today, Christians will gather together around the Lord's Table. Just think of some of those places.

In South Sudan, believers gather in villages scarred by civil war – families and clans warring against each other. Yet on this day, they come together, and share the Bread of Life. In Communist China, house churches whisper the Great Thanksgiving, fearing discovery. Even still, they know Christ IS present!

In Latin America, worshipers come together with songs of joy, clapping and dancing as they break bread. And here, in North America, we gather freely in sanctuaries. We often forget the cost of discipleship. And yet, He still calls us to deeper faith.

The Lord's Table stretches across borders. It changes us. From it, He calls us to see strangers as brothers and sisters. He calls us to stand with the oppressed. He commands us to forgive, as we have been forgiven. This is faith with mustard-seed

power. It uproots the deep-seated trees of hatred, prejudice, and injustice – and then casts them into the sea.

Jesus – Champion of Underdogs

When we read the Gospel record, we see that throughout His ministry, Jesus consistently stood with those on the margins of society. The underdogs. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He healed lepers who had been “canceled” by their society. He lifted up women, children, and foreigners as examples of faith. He told parables where Samaritans, beggars, and widows turned out to be the heroes.

Why do you suppose He did that? Because the Kingdom of God turns the world upside down. In God’s economy, the last are first, the poor are blessed, and the meek inherit the earth. Faith to change means we align ourselves with Jesus’ vision of us. We stand with the underdogs of our time. We seek justice for those who are oppressed. And we show mercy where the world shows hatred and contempt.

Think for a moment about South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu. During the dark years of apartheid, when racial segregation and violence were sanctioned by the law of the land, many believed change was impossible. But Archbishop Tutu kept preaching the Gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. He insisted that the God of the Bible was on the side of the oppressed.

On numerous occasions he stated that justice would prevail, and that mustard-seed faith could uproot the mulberry tree of apartheid. When apartheid finally fell in 1990, it wasn’t just politics in South Africa that changed. It was the faith of ordinary believers who dared to trust God’s vision of justice and peace. Desmond Tutu embodied mustard-seed faith that grew into a mighty tree of hope for the people of South Africa.

Faith in Exile

Think again for just a moment about Psalm 137. The exiles in Babylon felt like they couldn’t sing. But hundreds of years later, scattered Jews gathered in synagogues to read the Torah and pray. They found new ways to worship. Their faith adapted, survived, and even deepened while they were in exile.

In the same way, our faith calls us to sing songs of God in strange and foreign lands. We are foreigners in this land. Right now, we are in exile. We are the real refugees. As followers of Jesus, America is not our country. Heaven is our home. God’s Kingdom is our country. And so, the culture around us seems very foreign. American values shift. Divisions deepen. But friends, we’re not called to despair and fixate on it – we’re called to faith.

Faith that believes God can and will use us, even in exile. Faith that believes God can change us – even when forgiveness seems impossible. Faith that believes God’s Kingdom will come, on earth as it is in heaven! Several years ago there was a terrorist group in the Middle East – ISIS – that had taken over parts of Iraq and Syria. They rounded up Christians and beheaded them if they couldn’t pay ransoms for their lives.

Those martyrs lost everything. Their homes. Their lands. Their loved ones. Some even lost their own lives. But at the Table, they had Christ. With Christ, we always have hope! That's mustard-seed faith. It doesn't look spectacular. But it changes everything. It sings the songs of God in strange and foreign lands. It believes God's promises remain even in the face of exile.

Faith to Change

We see faith to change through three lenses – personal change, communal change, and global change. Regarding personal change, faith calls us to examine our own hearts. Where do we need to forgive? Where do we need to let go of bitterness? Where do we need to step out in trust?

In communal change, faith calls us to embody the Gospel – as a community. This means that we become a church that welcomes the stranger, feeds the hungry, and loves across lines of race, class, and nationality. With global change, faith calls us to stand with the global body of Christ. On World Communion Sunday, we're reminded that our brothers and sisters suffer persecution, hunger, and poverty. Our faith leads us to advocate for them through risk-taking mission and service, to extend extravagant generosity, and practice radical hospitality. Faith to change isn't about performing great and powerful miracles – it's about us being obedient, willing servants, and loving people – trusting that even mustard-seed acts will bear fruit for God's Kingdom.

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table today, we're invited to bring our mustard-seed faith. Perhaps your faith feels weak. Maybe you feel exiled in your own life – far from the joy you once knew. Or maybe you're wondering how you can ever forgive or move forward.

Hear this good news! You don't need great faith. You only need just a very little faith – in our very great God! The bread we break is enough. The cup we share is enough. The body of Christ given for us is enough! Here at His Table, across languages and nations, across joys and sorrows, we come together to sing His song – even in this strange land. And as we do, He gives us faith to change.

Prayer: Gracious God, We come to You with mustard-seed faith. Some of us are weary, some are hopeful, some are struggling to forgive, some are longing for change. Yet we believe You are the God who uproots trees, the God who heals wounds, the God who makes all things new. On this World Communion Sunday, bind us together with Your people across the globe and in every age. Teach us to walk humbly, serve faithfully, and live boldly for Your Kingdom. Grant us faith – not for show, not for power – but for love, forgiveness, and transformation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.