



“WHEN PIGS FLY!”

Luke 17:1-10

Lectionary 27 C

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Our Saviour Lutheran Church

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You will never forget him. He always talked too much about himself. It was hard to carry on a conversation with him because he never let you finish a sentence. So, you tried to avoid him, until that day when you overheard him gossiping about you. You dump your frustrations on your best friend. Your fury spews forth in a flood of fiery anger. Just when you expect your friend to agree with your indignation, he catches you off balance.

“Why don’t you go and talk to him? Tell him why you are upset. Maybe you can find a way to straighten out your relationship.”

“You have got to be kidding. I will never do that. I can’t stand him! I am going to make him pay for what he did to me. I will forgive him . . . when rocks float, . . . when hell freezes over . . . when pigs fly!”

That is exactly what Jesus’ disciples were feeling in today’s Gospel. Just prior to today’s Gospel Jesus instructed the disciples on forgiveness. Their willingness to forgive must never end. They must forgive seven times and more. If they are unwilling to do so, the consequences will be dire. A millstone will be put around their neck and they will be thrown into the sea.

Of course, the disciples were frightened. They would never be able to forgive like that. With a sense desperation they cry out to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” because only with a whole lot more faith would they ever be able to do what Jesus expected of them.

So, what does Jesus say to his frightened disciples? “Baloney! You could make a tree fly, IF you wanted to! 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.”

Gee, Jesus, thanks for the encouragement! We didn’t need a put down. We wanted help. But how likely is it that we can simply tell a tree to fly and it does? When hell freezes over, when rocks float, . . . when pigs fly?

But Jesus is unmoved. He just stands there repeating his words, “Of course you can! You could make a tree fly and be planted in the sea. You could forgive that selfish jerk, **IF you wanted to!**”

Maybe that is the real problem. The problem is US! We don't WANT to. We don't have enough faith. We don't really believe Jesus.

We finally think that Jesus is the one who is a little nuts. We are just like all those other scoffers and critics of Jesus did who stood there that day at the foot of the cross demanding, "We don't believe you Jesus. But we will, IF you come down from the cross. We don't buy this grace and mercy stuff. We don't really think that God is the friend of sinners and outcasts. But we WILL believe you IF . . . trees fly, pigs sprout wings, hell freezes over, rocks float . . . and you come down from the cross!"

Then we realize what Jesus has done to us. He has exposed us, just like he did to the disciples in today's Gospel, for being faithless unbelievers. As a result, we are ashamed, embarrassed and want to run and hide just like Adam and Eve did when God came walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening on that first day of the first sin. They knew what they had done. We know what we have done.

But this is Jesus speaking to us. He looks at us scoffers and faithless cowards standing there at the foot of the cross, shooting off our mouths, insisting that we would believe him, IF he would only meet our expectations. Jesus ought to scold us. Instead looks at us and says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

How do we respond? "Yeah, sure, right. Jesus, who do you think you are talking like this? God or something? We will believe this when we can make mulberry trees fly and pigs grow wings and flutter off into the sunset."

Our cynicism is confirmed when Jesus breathed his last and was laid to rest in his tomb. Our cynicism is confirmed when crooks get away with their crimes and the good folk suffer, when the poor have two strikes against them and can never get ahead, when the good die young and cancer takes our loved ones.

BUT . . . the story does not end there! On the third day Jesus rose from the dead. God declared to the world and all the cynical unbelievers like us who have given up hope . . . that Jesus was right! When Jesus forgave us from the cross, when he told that thief hanging next to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise," when that Roman centurion uttered from the foot of the cross, "Truly this was the Son of God," they were right, all of them.

There is the good news for us doubters who desperately utter, "Increase our faith!" When Jesus says, "Father, forgive them," he is talking to us. He forgives us even when we are too angry to forgive those who have wronged us and too cynical to keep on trying.

When God's mercy is set lose in this world, amazing things can happen. Trees may not fly. Pigs may not grow wings! Hell may not freeze over! Rocks may not float.

However, when Jesus says, "IF you had the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea' he means what he says. He says it not as a criticism of our weak faith. To the contrary, it is a word of encouragement.

It does not sound that way because he seems to make our faith dependent upon us and what we do. Most “If . . . then . . .” conditional statements work that way. “IF you win the race (which in fact you have not done), THEN you will receive a prize.” “IF you get all the questions right on the test (which in fact you have not done), THEN you will get an A.” “IF you eat your spinach (which in fact you have not done), THEN you will get your dessert.”

But there is another kind of conditional statement. This kind of statement is not criticism but comfort. It is not challenge but affirmation. It is not demand but gift. It works like this. “IF Jesus is Lord (which in fact he is), THEN your sins are forgiven.” Boys and girls, IF your parents love you . . . (which in fact they do), THEN you want to help them. IF you have lungs (which in fact you have), THEN breathe.” In other words, **because of what we already are, this is what we GET TO do.**

So, when Jesus says “IF you have the faith of a mustard seed,” he is not saying that the disciples don’t have faith. In fact Jesus is saying just the opposite. He is saying that you do have faith. Jesus has given it to you. Jesus isn’t counting, measuring or keeping score! “IF you have the faith of a mustard seed (which in fact it is . . . and size doesn’t matter) THEN you can do amazing things!”

IF God loves you, (which in fact God does!), IF you are the apple of God’s eye, (which in fact you are!), IF you are God’s beloved sons and daughters, (which in fact is the case) THEN amazing things happen. Your sins are forgiven. You can believe that you are blessed even when your world is falling apart. It is crazy, like saying to a mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea!” and it happens.



On the cover of today’s bulletin is a drawing that portrays Jesus’ startling words in today’s Gospel. See that angel planting that mulberry tree in the sea. That mulberry tree is us! The mulberry tree is a tenacious, water-seeking tree that struggles for every drop of moisture in the arid climate of Palestine. Can you imagine what would happen if it was directly planted in the water? It would grow and thrive like nobody’s business! That is us . . . planted in the waters of our Baptism. Rooted in the promises of God, drinking up the waters that will never stop flowing, we can trust the good word of God. We can be confident that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God, blessed and forgiven . . . forever.

Therefore, we no longer need to be angry with the gossip who has undermined us. We no longer have to have things our way and make those who have wronged us pay. Confident of who we are, we can lay aside our bitterness. We can actually go to our critic and talk to him, straighten things out and forgive him.

We live and act in our world differently. We can hope even in the face of injustice and problems that seem insurmountable.

Our society has become contentious and divided. Some say that it has not been this bad since the days of the Civil War. There is no escape from the anger and hatred. People cannot disagree amicably. However, here in the church we are not divided by such disagreements. We can argue and disagree and then we all fall on our knees seeking the mercy of God. This is what holds us together in a splintering world.

Jesus describes this new world in which we live in today's Gospel. He compares us to slaves who simply do their job. We show up for work not concerned about whom we can impress or how we can manipulate things to pad our pockets. We just do our job.

We spend time with the misfits. We care for those who can never pay us back. We give ourselves away in selfless service to others. We just love those whom God has put on our doorstep. We just do our job wherever God has sent us to serve. It's no big deal. It's what we do. It's what happens when you have faith the size of a tiny mustard seed. Extraordinary things happen! Trees are uprooted and planted in the sea . . . Pigs can fly!