

Luke 17:1-10

Hanging a millstone around someone's neck and tossing them into the sea does not sound like something that would come from the lips of Jesus. Rather, it sounds like a page out of the Mafia handbook. Mobsters do things like this, not God's people. Yet our Lord begins our text with this brutal picture to show us that He is a God full of...love. You heard correctly...not anger, but love.

No judge on earth would ever order a convicted criminal, no matter how severe his crime, to be punished by being tossed into the sea with a millstone around his neck. Civilized people do not do such things, not even to the worst criminals and murderers. But Jesus says that it would be better for a person to be drowned in that hideous way than for him to kill the faith of an immature Christian. Jesus loves His followers. So much so, that He protects His little ones like a mother grizzly protects her cubs...viciously, baring her sharp teeth, growling with rage against anyone or anything that would tear them away from her. You, dear followers of Christ, are loved. Woe to those who would attempt to steal you away from Jesus. His words here are fighting words. There is nothing more precious to Him than you.

But it does happen, out in the wild, that a mother grizzly bear, now and then, will lose a cub. It just happens. And it also happens, says Jesus, that temptations are sure to come and rob Christians of their faith. The world is a dangerous place especially for young Christians, just as remote Alaska is a dangerous place for young cubs. But you know the rules of the wild. Never get between a mother bear and her cub. And never try to grab a cub away from its mother.

Just as there are rules in the animal kingdom, so there are rules in God's Kingdom. Pastors are to preach and teach only the pure Word of God. To teach and preach falsely is to separate Jesus' followers from Jesus. Christian parents are to bring their children to Holy Baptism, and then to nurture them in their Christian faith through worship and the Word of God. Sunday School teachers are to prepare their lessons well so that the good news of Jesus is clear for the children. And every member of the congregation is to treat the other members in the way that God prescribes...rebuking and forgiving. To do otherwise may be setting a trap for Christians weak in the faith.

"If your brother sins," says Jesus, "rebuke him." He does not say, "Ignore his sin," but "rebuke him." No mother grizzly would allow her cub to walk away from her into danger. She would rebuke her cub. It's called "tough love." She may nudge him or even growl at him, but she will not simply stand there and ignore him. What about us? Do we rebuke here at Christ Lutheran Church? Or do we close our eyes to the sins of others? To allow Jesus' followers to fall away into a life of sin is not to love them. "Rebuke them," says Jesus. All of us here, pastor and members, need to learn better how to rebuke in love.

"If your brother repents," says Jesus, "forgive him." Now obviously grizzly bears do not forgive each other, but when a straying cub returns does not the mother welcome and receive her cub? We need to show more forgiveness here at Christ Lutheran Church. We have no choice. Jesus does not say, "Shun them," or "hold a grudge," or "get even." He says, "you must forgive." Elsewhere He says, "If you do not forgive...then God your Heavenly Father does not forgive you." If we do not welcome and receive repentant sinners, then we may be driving such sinners away from Jesus. All of us here have sinned against each other in various ways. If we hold on to those sins; if we refuse to forgive, then we are not Jesus' church, because Jesus' disciples forgive as God has forgiven them. I have done things in the past to sin against you, and I'm sorry. You have done things to sin against me and against each

other. Even if we were to sin against each other like this seven times in a day, Jesus says, "You must forgive your repentant brother."

Is it any wonder that Jesus' disciples, after hearing all of His words, cried out, "Lord, increase our faith!" How inadequate they were. How difficult it was for them to keep the rules of God's Kingdom. And how inadequate we may feel. How we struggle both to rebuke and to forgive. Our weak flesh does not like doing either one. We prefer to turn a blind eye to our neighbor when he sins, but if he sins against me, watch out! We find it very hard to forgive him.

Now if you're content living like this, then you will not, with Jesus' disciples, cry, "Increase my faith!" But all of you who are wise, who desire to live as God's people but seldom find the strength to do so, voice these words with His disciples, "Lord, increase our faith." And in response, Jesus says, "If you had faith like a mustard seed..." Just a tiny grain, but within that little seed there is a powerful tree. Plant that tiny grain seed and over time it will grow into the largest plant in the entire garden.

And so with faith. Faith is a vessel, a seed. It's not the size which is so important; it's what is within it. Your faith does not save you because it's so great, but because it grasps Jesus Christ. The biggest faith in all the world is worthless if it contains within it Allah, or the teachings of Buddha, or whatever. But the smallest, tiniest faith, when it contains Christ; when it clings to Jesus alone, is more precious than fine gold.

Friends, what Jesus is saying here is that you do not need more faith; you need more of Him. The more of Christ you have--the more you will rebuke in love, the more you will forgive others, the more you will be like Christ in heart and mind. It's not about you and me; it's about Jesus. The more He is being planted like a seed into our ears, the more He will take root and grow within our hearts and lives.

Jesus ends our text by speaking of unworthy servants. No master will let his servant eat before he does. And no master will thank his servant for doing his duty. You and I are those servants. Even when we carry out our duties as Christians--when we bring our children to baptism, when we raise them in the nurturing milk of the Word of God, when we properly rebuke others who sin, and forgive those who sin against us, even when we do all this by God's strength, and not ours, we should not expect God to congratulate and thank us. We are only doing what we are supposed to do.

But here is an amazing thing. Jesus, our Master, does just the opposite of what any other master would do. Rather than demanding that you prepare His supper, He prepares Supper for you. As He washed His disciples' feet, so He gets down beneath you and serves you. He takes up your cross. He is nailed there in your place. He dies your death. He is punished for you. He fills His cup with His own blood and gives it to you for your forgiveness. In baptism He dresses you in His holiness. At His table He feeds you what you need. No master would do these things for his servants, but Jesus does them for you, for He humbled Himself to become your Servant--not because it was His duty; He did it out of love.

This text, all the way through, is about the love of God for you. He loves you so much that He becomes angry when anyone attempts to steal you away from Him. He loves you, and so even though your faith may be feeble, He gives you more and more of Himself and His strength in His words to you. He loves you, and so He your Master, becomes a Servant to you even to the point of dying for you. And because He loves you, He prepares this meal for you -- for your forgiveness and for eternal life for you.

So do you feel loved? Do you feel stronger in your faith after hearing all of Jesus' words? You may feel nothing, but it does not change what is true. No matter how you have lived, good or bad, Christ-like or not, God declares His love for you today. No matter whether you feel forgiven or not, God today declares that you are forgiven. His Son died for you. His blood was shed for you dear sinner. All of your sins are forgiven by your merciful God.

No matter whether or not you feel stronger in your faith today after hearing Jesus' words and receiving His true body and blood, one thing is certain--Jesus is here today for you. He is here for your assurance. He is here to send you home today confident in His love. He is here to help you face the struggles of the coming week. And because He is here, your faith is strengthened, whether you feel stronger or not. Go in peace, friend. You are loved and forgiven by your Lord. Amen.