

## Luke 17:1-10

When Roy Scheider got his first glimpse of the great white shark in the movie, *Jaws*, he told the ship's captain, who was hunting the shark, *"You're going to need a bigger boat."* That's pretty much how Jesus' apostles reacted after they heard Him talking about temptations to sin, millstones, and forgiving their brother. *"We're going to need a bigger faith."* "Lord," they cried, *"Increase our faith!"*

Is that how you felt this morning after hearing these words of Jesus? I honestly don't think that most Christians concern themselves too much with what our Lord says here. They think their boat is big enough. And yet, the words Jesus uses here are as strong and forceful as they could possibly be: *"Pay attention to yourselves!"* He says, *"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in one day, and turns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' you absolutely must forgive him!"*

Living as a Christian is a little like walking a tightrope. It's easy to slip off one side or the other. On the one hand, we are to rebuke our brother when he sins. "Ah, but where's the love in that?" we say. We do everything but rebuke our erring brother, and I'm just as guilty as you. We ignore their sin. We excuse their sin. We cover up their sin. We even, at times, laugh at their sin, as we do when a friend becomes drunk. Why don't we rebuke them? Perhaps we don't want to anger them. Perhaps we don't want to judge them, after all, we are just as sinful. Perhaps we think that if we just love them while ignoring their sin, they'll eventually come around.

The other side of the tightrope is just as treacherous. When my brother sins against me, I go way beyond rebuke; I get angry at him and refuse to forgive him. And yet, that is not an option. We don't have the choice of forgiving or not forgiving, just as we don't have the choice of rebuking or not rebuking. It is imperative that we rebuke, and it is imperative that when our brother repents, we forgive. We know what to do. We simply have a hard time doing it. No wonder the apostles cried, *"Increase our faith!"*

On the one hand, the apostles were right in their request, but on the other hand, their words show their lack of understanding. They were right because they did not have it in them. Their boat wasn't big enough. They struggled to rebuke when they should have, just as we do, and they struggled to forgive just as we do. When they cried, *"Increases our faith!"* they were admitting that they deserved to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around their neck. They were causing others to sin. They were causing others to lose their faith. They deserved millstones, plain and simple. And so do we.

When our brother lives in sin by refusing to repent and turn from his sin, if we who know about this, let him go and do not bring God's Law to bear, rebuking him, our brother may perish forever. And when our brother sins against us, but repents, if we refuse to forgive, we may drive him to despair and he, with us, will perish. Yes, "with us," I say, for to refuse to forgive our brother drives Christ out of our heart. We don't have it in us, either. Our boat, also, is not big enough.

It's good to want a bigger faith, but the way Jesus says it, our desire, our cry should be just to have faith. Faith the size of a mustard seed is all we need. It's not great faith in God that saves us; it's faith in a great God. It's not big faith in God that allows us to forgive others; it's faith in the bigness of God's mercy.

How big is the faith of a newly baptized infant? Big enough to save him. He doesn't have some of God's gifts in baptism--he has all of them. He doesn't have part of Christ in baptism--he has the whole Christ living in him. His faith may be the size of a mustard seed, but his faith makes him God's forgiven child, claimed by Jesus and alive in Him.

When a small child is sleeping in his father's arms, what makes the child safe and secure? His big faith and trust in his daddy? No. He is safe and secure because of his daddy's love and care, and his sure, steady, and strong arms. That's you, my friends. Don't look at the size of your faith. You will either become proud, or worried. Look at the size of your God. Look at how big His heart is toward you. Look at how big the nail marks are in His hands and feet; at the size of the stripes on His back, the bruises on His head. His mercy toward you is great. His forgiveness for you is unlimited. His boat--His church--is big enough, big enough to save you, to rescue you from the jaws of hell, to remove the millstone from your neck and lift you up from the depths into the safety of His loving and strong arms.

The only man ever to walk the tightrope perfectly is Jesus. He rebuked the erring brother, and He forgave all who came to Him with penitent hearts. He forgave the men who were murdering Him. Jesus walks that tightrope right now, right here. Through His Word of Law, which He speaks through the mouth of His pastor, Jesus is rebuking you. "Repent!" is His cry to you, "Turn away from your sin and do not live in it." Do not ignore your sin or excuse it. Repent now, because God is here with a merciful heart that is bigger than your sin.

He forgives you, no strings attached. He forgives you not because you have a big faith, but because Jesus suffered and died for you. He forgives you not on condition that you clean up your life. For Jesus' sake He forgives you, and His mercy, His forgiveness for you changes you; it changes your heart and life. There is no wrong you have done that is too great and terrible for God to forgive. Everything...every sin of yours, great and small, is forgiven. Jesus died for all of it. He died for every one of you. And because you believe this, Jesus lives within you forgiving others. Your flesh and mine do not want to forgive. But Jesus is greater than our sinful flesh. He is the One forgiving your brother through you, when your brother sins against you.

We do not need a congregation of Christians with big faith; just a congregation of mustard seeds. And you know that seeds need water to grow. That water is here for you. Jesus, the Living Water, is here in Word and in Sacrament. And so our handful of mustard seeds is growing, and will keep growing. A congregation of people who lovingly rebuke our erring brothers, and who heartily forgive--this is who you are because you are in Christ, and He is in you. Amen.