



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 17 – Proper 22 (C)

Getting to Work

[RCL] Lamentations 1:1-6; Lamentations 3:19-26 or Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Jesus is fed up.

In today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has just finished teaching about mercy and forgiveness. Verses 1-5 are the famous passage about forgiving your sibling seven times in a day, over and over again. The expectation is clear—you must forgive. But the disciples, much like us, realize how difficult forgiveness can be. They respond with a simple request: "Increase our faith."

It is an honest request. A faithful request. They know they cannot meet the demands of Christ on their own. And so, they ask for more faith. You might be able to relate to this. How often do we know what ought to be done, and doubt our ability (or willingness) to do it?

It's a good thing that we have so many scriptural examples of Jesus embodying grace and mercy and patience, because Jesus' response in this story is a little surprising. Today, we get a figure that resembles more of a parent at the end of their rope. He tells the disciples that they don't need to get twisted up, waiting for more. He tells them that even faith the size of a mustard seed could uproot a mulberry tree. In other words, they don't need much, and they already have what they need. What is required is not more faith, but the willingness to act with the faith already given.

Tired of conversation, tired of excuses, Jesus wants his disciples to just get to work. Just do the thing! Sometimes, spreading the gospel is not about understanding; it's about duty. About faithfulness. About showing up and doing the work. Like muscles that grow through exercise, faith deepens by being practiced—through forgiveness offered, justice sought, prayers spoken, and service rendered.

Following Jesus is impossible if we expect to do it perfectly. Our Baptismal Covenant is bold: We are to love God, to love our neighbor, to strive for justice and peace, to respect the dignity of every human being. We faithfully and cheerfully sign up for a never-ending, impossible, Sisyphean task of following Christ Jesus with who we are, what we have, and what we've been given.

We do not need more faith to begin. We do not need a perfect understanding of Scripture before we talk about our relationship with God. We do not need a new paint job before inviting someone to worship. We do not need a full 401(k) before tithing to the church. We do not need flawless lives before praying for others.

Sometimes, we just need to jump in.

We already have what we need. The call is not to wait, but to act.

We can certainly spiral into dissecting, questioning, and hypothesizing on what the disciples meant when they asked for more faith. Matt Skinner, reflecting on this passage in a “Sermon Brainwave” podcast, asks some big questions: “What is faith? Is it power? Humility? Obedience? Gratitude? Is it even measurable?” It’s easy to get caught in these endless questions. Perhaps that’s what the disciples were doing—hesitating, debating, looking for loopholes. Jesus cuts through the hesitation: You have enough. Just do it. Perfectionist, procrastinator, self-doubter—whatever the excuse, you might have also found yourself in a position waiting for the right moment, the right resources, the right plan. But discipleship is not about waiting for the perfect season; it is about trusting that God’s Spirit equips us here and now.

This is what Jesus means when he speaks of the servant doing their duty. Jesus uses a contextual example that people would understand, although that meant the image of slavery—an exploitative system we rightly reject.

But the point still lands: discipleship is not about reward or recognition. It is about fidelity. Doing the work we have promised to do.

Jesus asks, “Who among you, if you had a servant, would tell that servant to take the night off when there is still work to be done?” Who would do the work themselves while the servant, already weary, rests? The expected answer is no one. But the real answer—the gospel answer—is Jesus. For he is the one who takes on the labor we cannot bear. He does the work we could never, or would never, do ourselves.

While Jesus often gives us examples of Sabbath and rest and respite, there is always work to be done. Neighbors to love. Systems of exploitation to overturn. The gospel to proclaim to a broken and hurting world. And we have promised in our Baptismal Covenant to do these things. It is “meet and right so to do” without expectation of a prize, simply because it is our calling.

While Jesus here presses his disciples with what could be read as exasperation, Paul’s letter to Timothy offers a gentler encouragement. If Jesus is the parent at the end of their rope, Paul is the parent who kneels down to remind us of who we are.

Paul affirms and celebrates the gift of sincere faith displayed in Timothy, passed with wisdom through generations, and he affirms and celebrates the grace from Jesus Christ, who has brought eternal life and light through the gospel. But Paul does not say, “Great, Jesus has come, we can relish in his light and grace. Go take a nap.” No, he encourages Timothy to join him in the “suffering for the gospel.”

Paul, of course, writes these words from prison, expecting execution any day. He neither dwells on his current state in a call for sympathy nor tells Timothy to run away to avoid the same fate. He implores Timothy to join him in suffering. To jump in. To just go for it, taking the risk, being brave and bold, embracing the responsibility of leading the church in Ephesus and beyond. Boldness, Paul knows, is necessary for the life of faith. Paul’s witness reminds us that boldness does not mean fearlessness; it means living faithfully in spite of fear.

The life of faith is complicated. People are complicated. And following Christ is complicated. There are expectations we will never fully meet. There are failures we cannot avoid. There are times when we might doubt if we are prepared to live out such a life. We, like the disciples, may feel like we just need a little more faith, and *then* we can proclaim the Gospel, love our neighbor, be “good enough.”

But grace abounds. Faith the size of a mustard seed is enough. And so, together, as communities of faith, we discover our boldness. We do the work—not for trophies, not for recognition, but because it is what we have promised. It is what God calls us to do. And it is what Jesus has done for us, over and over again. Amen.

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