

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

SEE JANE FLY. SALLY TOO.

Luke 17:[1-4], 5-10

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Analysis by Jerome Burce

[1 Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! 2 It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. 3 Be on your guard! If another disciple [Gk: a brother] sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 4 And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."]

5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 The Lord replied, "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.

7 "Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? 8 Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10 So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'

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Author's Notes:

- This is the second time that the present writer has put this text through the sieve of a six-step Crossings analysis. The first time was three years ago. See <https://crossings.org/theology/2007/theolo633.shtml>, where you'll find an example of what Crossings founder Robert Bertram liked to call "grounding," a deep engagement with the text per se. Of course communicating the Word to audiences today requires additional moves, at least two in Bertram's thinking. One he called "tracking," where one looks for ways in which issues that surface in the text appear also in contemporary experience. The second further move is "crossing," where the specific benefits of Christ revealed through the "grounding" process are applied to today's hearer. To illustrate this the analysis that follows will start with the work of three years ago and track it through an episode the writer stumbled across this past September 12. Then will come the crossing, illustrative, one hopes, of the kind of service that the text as Word-of-God-for-us might render for others.
- Three years ago this writer suggested that lectionary editors erred when they snipped the first five verses of chapter 17 away from the day's appointed reading. He continues to think that, urging fellow preachers to restore them when the text is read out in churches. For the rationale behind this, see the link above.
- An exegetical observation: the present text, like all the others we've been working through in the past several weeks, comes from a long section of Luke's Gospel that began when Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). This move to Jerusalem and the cross that awaits is the

interpretive key to everything the section contains, all of it anticipating the final, compelling question that wraps up the entire Gospel: "Was it not necessary that the Son of Man should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (24:26).

DIAGNOSIS: Going Nowhere

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Digging In

Jane and Sally, sisters in Christ, behaved the other day like the near strangers they also are. For sure they don't like each other very much. That became obvious when Jane butted into a conversation Sally was having with Laura, a mutual friend. She acted, Jane did, as if Sally weren't there at all, to which Sally responded by huffing off with some sotto voce muttering about shopping around for another church to join. Laura, catching this, hurried after her to soothe and console. "Can't stand that woman," blustered Sally. "Talk to her," said Laura, returning to Jane. Ah, but Jane would not. Nor would Sally deign to overlook Jane's transgression, let alone to forgive it. Suppose now that both are in the pews when the Lord speaks anew about seven-times-a-day repenting and forgiving where the "brother" is concerned (vv. 3-4). Suppose too that they catch each other's eye as the words are read out. Will they gasp within themselves at the brazen chutzpah of Jesus' demand? And if they're serious about honoring him, will they too think to ask, "Increase our faith" (v. 5)?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : In Me I Trust

Then again I know Jane, I know Sally. You know them too, having also lived your whole life long with the stuff that's driving them right now. For sure their faith is small. Worse still by

far, it's misdirected. Ask them if they believe in God, and they'll say, "Of course!" The God they mean is the one whose Bible words they latched onto like limpets just now as they sang the morning's psalm. He makes "the justice of your [petty] cause shine like the noonday" (Psalm 37:6). Which means (say they) that "I get to stand my ground. Let the other grovel first, or if not, to blazes with her. As for this hyperbolic Jesus stuff, me making trees to fly and all (v. 6), who in their right mind can take that seriously? I don't, I won't. And if that saying is over the top, then so is the one about endless forgiving. I don't believe it, I will not do it, not where yon rude creature is concerned, that's for sure. My roots in God are deep, and God knows it. I will trust him, thank you, to know who is right and who is not. She may as well start weeping now."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Servant as Master*

So there sits each in the chair of mistress/master, a seat well shined by my backside too. Haven't I done my righteous Christian duty this week? I came to church, I brought my offering (a hefty one, I'd like to think), I hauled the kids to Sunday School and confirmation and youth group and choir and all those other things they insist on squeezing into weekly parental schedules that were already insane. It's my turn now to sit and be served, God dishing up his words of affirmation. What I don't need right now is yet more work, as in hauling the Lord's peace to a creature I loathe when the liturgy calls for it. To blazes with the liturgy. "Give me, God, the peace and quiet I've earned and then be done with it." That's me. A question now to preachers: Will you come within a mile of this horror in my heart? Will you dare to distress my inner Jane-and-Sally by observing that Christ is disinclined to yield his master's chair to me (v. 7)? That with him there is no such thing as asking too much of someone who dares to call him Lord (v. 8)? That by refusing my

duty now I'm dissing him and the Righteous One who vindicates his cause (again, Psalm 37:6)? Will you announce my pending dismissal, worthless slave that I am (v. 10), and not just worthless, but rebellious to boot?

PROGNOSIS: Flying Far

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Master as Servant*

Here's the thing: a preacher that nervy will have a chance, at least, of grabbing my attention, and not just mine but Jane's and Sally's too. A preaching angel did that once, flooding a field with horrible light so that calloused ears might hear what God means finally to say: "Don't be afraid. For you, a Savior..." (2:10-11). And for me, for Jane and Sally too, a Lord who saves by doing for us the dirty slave's work that all of us are balking at right now. Hence his stately progression to Jerusalem as lordly slave or enslaved lord, take your pick, sins flying, forgiven, with every step he takes (e.g. 15:2; 17:14; 19:5, 9). Once there he'll use his dying breath to uproot a jungle of enormity and send it flying as far as east is from the west (v. 6; cf. Psalm 103:7); and he'll do this in the first place not merely for persons rude and haughty but for frothing enemies with murder on their minds (23:34). He'll do it also to win the Father's Easter nod for today's jaw-dropping act of lordly self-abasement, the ascended and ruling Christ girding himself in bread and wine to feed me and Jane and Sally too, and every other shiftless minion who dares to seek a handout. Who among you, he asks, would make supper for your slave (v. 7, emphasis added)? No one, of course. So wonder of wonders, he does it instead and he does it for us all.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *In Mercy I Trust*

Suppose then that Jane is struck this Sunday, as if for the

first time, how she communes not by right but by mercy. Suppose too that the preaching pushes her to new intimations about that mercy; how unaccountable it is, how embarrassing to the master who extends it, and how this master so wondrously finds his glory in taking on that embarrassment for her sake, self-righteous snot though she is. In such intimations lie grains of new faith, a fresh trust in the Christ who is right for her. Will this new faith root out the old one, that misbegotten confidence of hers in her own righteous standing before God? Says Jesus: it will. Watch that bad old faith lift like a millstone from her neck and plop into the sea (v. 2), allowing her to live the brand new life that Jesus is busy giving her on the strength of his death and in the power of his resurrection. One early step in brand new living is an itch, a faith-full desire, to do unto others as Christ has done unto you (cf. 6:31), and to do it even at the cost of embarrassment to oneself.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Uprooted*

Comes now that liturgical pause, the peace of God announced, the opportunity granted for the making of peace on Jesus' account among people in the room. So there stands Sally, here stands Jane, and over there am I with an eye on the fellow that I don't like so much. We were planning, you'll recall, to stand our ground, all three of us. That was prior to the re-preaching of the Gospel and through it the master's ministration. Did we hear, and in hearing did we believe our ears, however feebly? It doesn't take much. A mustard seed's worth will do the trick of uprooting feet and causing them to land, if not in the sea, than at least on the other side of the aisle with hand proffered or holy hug intended (v. 6). Watch Jane approaching Sally and Sally turning to Jane. That's no small miracle, you know. They still don't like each other any more than I like the fellow I'm headed for. But suddenly it matters more to honor Christ, and so we do.

So others have done across the centuries, those mustard seeds of faith-in-Christ hurling them like mulberry trees not merely across aisles but over continents and beyond seas to bring the sweet peace of God to people Jesus died for. Now it's my turn to play the flying tree, and Jane's turn too, and also Sally's. And how about you?