

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

WHEN TREES FLY, PIGS TOO

Luke 17: [1-4] 5-10

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22)

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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Note:

*17:5-10, today's appointed passage, has got to be read in conjunction with Luke's preceding paragraph, 17:1-4. Older versions of the lectionary were quite correct in holding these sections together as a single unit, 17:1-10 (see, e.g., Lutheran Book of Worship, p. 28). After all, the verb that NRSV renders as "forgive" (vv. 3, 4) is *aphiemi*, the base meaning of which is "let go," "send away," "remove." The connection between that and the saying about the mulberry tree is too obvious to ignore; and the ejaculation of v. 5 make no sense if heard in a contextual vacuum. Recommendation to preachers: let the people hear the whole thing.*

DIAGNOSIS: "Not a Chance!"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *"You Ask Too Much!"*

"Increase our faith!" That's a verbalized gasp—a groan, maybe—emitted by "the apostles" (v. 5). No wonder. They're the chosen ones, culled from the larger herd of "disciples" (v. 1; cf. 6:13-16) to spearhead the preaching of "repentance and forgiveness of sins...to all nations" (24:47). Now it hits them. The scope of the job Jesus has in mind for them is grotesque (the same pig-of-a-sibling seven times forgiven in one day for seven sins against the same person, you, in v. 4). "What? So huge a mound of malfeasance and I'm just supposed to flick it away? Sorry, Jesus, can't be done. Not by me. Not as I am. I don't have it in me."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Jesus Mocked*

"Phooey," says Jesus, "You could make a tree fly if you wanted to" (to paraphrase, v. 6). The crowd, listening on Sunday, will answer that with blank and stony looks. (A few would titter,

only it's church and they're polite.) Their faces betray them, of course. They don't believe what Jesus said either. Still less do they believe in their capacity to conjure up the species of faith—"What might that be?" they wonder)—that levitates logs on the one hand and, on the other, forgives the brother beyond all reason, sense, and enduring. Have we caught the action of this listening moment? Instead of increasing their faith, the Lord has decreased it. Between you and me, for us too he sounds like a nut. (Some would say this out loud, only, as we've mentioned, it's church, and we're polite.) Of course this is hardly the first time that Jesus will have exposed himself to our contempt, our scathing unfaith, for the sake of saving us (23:35).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Stench of Faith (Ours)*

First things first, though. Before the saving comes the killing, in this case the killing of rotten faith and the old creature who thrives on it. Of rotten faiths, none stink more than faith-as-work, the notion that "if you really believe" God will jump however high you tell him. While you're at it why not ask him to plow your field, cook your supper, draw your bath and bring you the night-capping cocktail (v. 8)? Oh yes, and he'll wiggle his nose and make that tree's worth of paper, bills and obligations all, fly from your desk and plop into the sea or wherever he thinks to send them, all because he owes you, so great was your faith. No wonder the apostles—today's listeners too—are begging for an increase. No wonder Jesus answers by driving us to scorn him. Scorning him, we scorn God. And rotten faith, having thought to enslave God by its strength and virtue, is exposed for the fraud that it is. And Adam dies. Or at least he smells his doom.

PROGNOSIS: "And How!"

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Aroma of*

Faith (Christ's)

All this is said and done en route to Jerusalem where the one and only "son of Adam" (3:38) with enough pure and honest faith to obligate God will do just that. Along the way he'll keep exhibiting his "authority on earth to forgive sins" (5:24) and his propensity to be "among you as one who serves" (22:27). Reaching Jerusalem, he'll be crucified. Two statements and acts of astonishing faith will bracket that event, each an instance of faith-as-trust, the polar opposite of Adam's faith-as-work: "Father, not my will but yours be done" (22:42); and, again, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46). The centurion who witnesses the latter statement will make the call: "Surely this man was innocent" (23:47)—innocent, that is, of Adam's self-serving pseudo-faith. God agrees. He says so in the thunderous "Amen" of Easter morning. One of the aforementioned apostles, reflecting on this in his first-recorded sermon, will draw the conclusion: This Jesus stinketh not—and we're the beneficiaries (Acts 2:27, 31-33).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Jesus Praised* Beneficiaries? How so? Because in his dying, Christ has made it possible for puny faith to do unheard-of things as it taps into Christ's own serving, saving faith-for-us. Case in point: that thieving swine who repents, if you can call it repentance—really a feeble semi-turn in Jesus' direction (no more than the nails will allow). His dying oink: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (23:42). This is faith as mustard seed, tiny, negligible, hardly hoping at all. What comes of it? He of the Great Faith speaks his word, the fellow himself lands in Paradise "today" (23: 43), and the tree he's dying on is lifted from that hill and planted in the sea of apostolic witness that reaches "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Come to think of it, there's another word Jesus spoke from the cross: "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing" (23:34).

Sounds like a word for the scoffers this Sunday (see Step 2). The slightest nod in its direction will lift the millstones (v. 2) from the necks of these arrogant pigs and drop them in the sea. The ones who wore them, now saints in the making, are left to stand there either praising God as the apostles will (24:53) or thanking Jesus after the fashion of next week's Samaritan leper (17:16).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *"When Can We Get Started?"*

"I'll believe it," goes the saying, "when pigs fly." When the pig herself is flying high as a thanking, praising saint—guess what?—her faith increases (v. 6). And with the increase of her faith comes no mere flying tree but a flying forest of trees. Think again of those apostles. Here they gasp at the prospect of attending to a single sinner (v. 5). The day is coming when, doing as they were ordered (v. 10), they'll merrily preside at the baptizing of 3000 sinners (Acts 2:41). And that, for them, will be only the beginning, the saving water being sloshed from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to—yes—the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Pigs and trees have filled the air ever since. Will they do so in the end of the earth you presently inhabit, the one you preach to, perhaps? Sure. Preach faith in Jesus and only faith in Jesus. Then watch.