

THE TEXT:

LUKE 17:1 Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. **2**It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. **3**So watch yourselves.

If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. **4**Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”

5The apostles said to the Lord: “Give us more faith.” **6**And the Lord said: “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you will say to this mulberry tree: ‘Be uprooted and be planted in to the sea’ and it will obey you. **7**Suppose one of you has a servant who ploughs or tends sheep. Would he say to him when he comes out of the field: ‘Come here immediately and recline at the table’?

8Wouldn’t he instead say: ‘Prepare something I can eat and prepare to serve me at the table until I have finished eating and drinking, and after these things you may eat and drink’? **9**Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? **10**So you also, when you have done all the things commanded of you, say: ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have only done what we were obliged to do.’

SERMON—Forgiveness through God’s people—the only place it will happen

What an incredible sight! Astonishing! Just imagine—you’re walking along the foreshore down here at Glenelg. It’s a beautiful spring day; blue sky, fresh sea air, the sound of the rolling waves in the distance, and the sight of yachts bobbing up and down like a child’s toys in the bathtub. Then a large shadow quickly moves over you, and you look up to see...a flying mulberry tree! That’s right—a mulberry tree, travelling through the air, with clumps of someone’s backyard soil dropping on to the beach, before one almighty *kerplonk* as the tree drops into the water next to the jetty. A flock of seagulls hastily retreat in shock and salt water sprays onto your face as the roots plunge themselves into the sea floor.

What an image Jesus gives us today. Let’s look at some facts to put this into perspective. Mulberry trees can grow up to 12 metres high. They are anchored in the ground by an extensive root system, with long, lateral roots. Once they’re established, these roots can do significant damage in suburban settings, lifting footpaths, foundations, crowding out other plants. Who, then, could possibly uproot a Mulberry Tree, and then transplant it in the ocean, simply by telling it to?

So why on earth does Jesus give this bizarre image in response to the Apostles’ plea: “Give us more faith!” How can faith send mulberry trees flying into the sea, and what would be the point? If Jesus wants us to do this, does it mean that we lack faith, that we don’t believe enough?

“Give us more faith!” That’s where the Gospel reading set aside for this Sunday usually begins in the lectionary. But let’s go back to the beginning of the chapter, where Jesus says to his disciples: “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.”

Jesus is talking to his disciples. He is speaking to them of how serious sin is—and they must take it seriously: “Watch yourselves” he says to them. We live in a sinful world, with wills that are bound to sin. Sin will always be with us in this physical life on earth. It will be with us in the church too. The church is not a perfect community of perfect people. Often the expectations are that it should be. But while we are saints, we are sinners at the same time. The old sinful nature still battles against our new nature in Christ. We can be selfish and short sighted, hurting others, damaging relationships among the people of God.

That is why Jesus speaks with his disciples about the seriousness of sin, and how it is to be handled in the church. We are not to deal with sin in the ways the world deals with it. We are not to simply grin and bear it, turn a blind eye to it, cover it up, move on, seek self-justification, pretend it isn't that bad, blame others, or seek revenge. We are to make every effort to mend what is broken, by showing grace through asking for forgiveness, and granting forgiveness.

The scandal in the church is not only that someone sins and causes others to stumble in sin. But the scandal is also if a Christian does not forgive. When someone sins against us, we tend to slip back to the default way of operating; the way of our old nature; the way of the world—to keep our distance, write the person off, carrying our anger and bitterness. It's easy to slip into worldly approaches of working out who is to blame. Good" and "bad," "right" and "wrong" are categories used to define others. But those who have sinned against us were never here *because of their good behaviour! And nor are we*. All people are here because God loves them.

Meting out judgment, giving the other a roasting, heaping shame on them, or withdrawing from them to punish them are worldly patterns we can quickly default to, rather than giving a child of God the grace of God. This is such a travesty, because the refusal to give forgiveness never achieves anything, other than widening the chasm of relationship breakdown, or increasing the cycle of retaliation. These ways of dealing with sin and hurt are themselves sinful and hurtful, and causes brothers and sisters to stumble in their faith, because they feel that it is easier to just give up on the church and not come back anymore. The real shame is that they feel they can no longer come to the one and only place God's forgiveness is extended.

So then, the right way to take sin seriously is to do it in a way that forgiveness can happen—not only God's, but ours. Jesus says: "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

The Apostles reply: "Lord, increase our faith!" Why is it so hard to ask for forgiveness? Why is it so hard to forgive? It might seem more likely that we could uproot a mulberry tree and plonk it next to the pier, rather than to forgive someone who has hurt us so much...

Aahh...there it is: forgive someone *who has hurt us so much*. Sin hurts. That's *why* it's so hard—painfully hard—to forgive. It hurts being hurt. Especially in the church where we would expect to feel the safest, and treated most kindly.

Little wonder the Apostles ask: "Lord give us more faith!" Often we say the same: "If only I had enough faith!" or "If I could just believe enough!" Can we believe enough? Can we trust enough? Do we have enough faith to make things happen? Can we actually have 'more' faith? After all, one either has faith in Jesus or not. I think this is what Jesus means when he uses the illustration of a mustard seed, such a tiny, tiny thing. "Faith like mustard seed" is simply trust in him, a trust that holds onto him, depends on him, and lives every day in him—the kind of faith Paul speaks of when he says: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13).

But uprooting a mulberry tree? Imagine saying to a mulberry tree, "Pull up your roots and head for the sea!" No one could do that! That's impossible.

Jesus' response to the Apostles is meant to encourage them. Who among the human race could carefully uproot a mulberry tree, and then transplant it in the ocean, simply by telling it to? No one! That's impossible.

But not impossible with God. If God were to tell such a huge tree to be uprooted and relocate to the sea, then it would happen, just as God said. After all, at the beginning of the Bible we are told this is how God spoke creation into existence: "God said 'Let there be'...and it was so". God's powerful word does what it says.

So how much more then, when Jesus' word is simply spoken to bind and forgive sins will he do what is said. What mere human has the authority and ability to bind and forgive sins? But Jesus does! So what an encouragement for Jesus' disciples—and the Apostles—that when the Apostles speak Jesus' word to bind and forgive sins, Jesus himself will simultaneously speak to all his disciples, and actually remove people's sins from them. And what a great encouragement for the disciples as they announce God's forgiveness one to another in their daily lives, for when Jesus' word is used, Jesus speaks, and what he says happens!

Today's words about mustard seeds and mulberry trees are also for us, Jesus' disciples of today. Whenever there is repentance of sin, there must be forgiveness extended, because the purpose of this place is to be a place of God's grace. The forgiveness of sins is to be at the very core (or better put: at the very *heart*) of our congregation's practice. For the forgiveness of sins is the very basis of how the church came into existence in the first place. If we weren't God's people who he had first forgiven and called into the communion of saints, none of us would be here!

Yet here we are again today, gathered by God to come into his gracious presence. God is present everywhere, true—but he has gathered us here to be present to us in a way and for a purpose unlike anywhere else. As he speaks, and his word goes forth, he goes to work to bring his forgiveness and blessing to you, transforming our hearts to know Christ and his love.

It is a lie of the devil to think that forgiving someone is harder work than harbouring bitterness, resentment and anger. Mustard seed faith says that we *can* forgive, not because we might have enough belief or strength within ourselves to do it, but simply because we live in Christ, and he opens our lips and strengthens us to do it. The One who came and died for us, the One who defeated death and rose again to life for us, the One who called us in Holy Baptism and made us his own, is with you. He goes to work with his power in us, leading us to reach out to people with divine grace rather than writing them off. Then we see that his powerful word can do far more than uproot trees—it breaks the cycle of retribution and revenge, healing and transforming relationships, uprooting sin and abuse and hurt, hurling it into the sea.

Jesus is in his church every Sunday to do for his people what he does nowhere else: to publicly forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Through his absolving of you, Christ has released you—all of you—from bondage to sin, death and the kingdom of Satan. His word of pardon is the only way guilt can be removed and a troubled conscience comforted, to bring you true freedom. As the words are proclaimed to you: "Peace be with you!" the mustard seed faith God gives you opens you ears to hear those words as the risen Jesus' own words to you, and opens your hearts to reach out with his grace to others.

That is why even if a person who sins against you seven times a day turns back to you seven times and says 'I repent,' you must forgive them rather than write them off. For this is the very way God your Father in heaven has first loved you, through his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.