

*The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost*  
October 6, 2013  
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Luke 17:1-10

*Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." The apostles said to the LORD, "Increase our faith!" He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you. "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" (NIV)*

Two friends are on a hike when they come to a raging river whose waters had become high and dangerous. Since it's impossible to swim across it, they look along the bank, and spot two bridges. The first bridge is supported on both ends with thick concrete. Massive steel girders span the river, which have been overlaid with solid oak planks. It looks like you could drive a tank over it. The other bridge is an oddity. It's constructed out of cardboard and fastened together with duct tape. The rain the night before has left the cardboard sagging somewhat, but it is, nevertheless, a bridge. The one friend asks, "What bridge you gonna to take?" "What! You're joking, right?" the other answers, "I'm taking the steel bridge." But he soon discovers his friend isn't joking. "I'm taking the cardboard bridge," he says.

The first friend gets to the big concrete bridge and is completely unnerved. His palms begin to sweat and there's a tremor in his hands. He can't take his eyes off of the fast moving river below. Thinking it will help to better disperse his weight, he begins to crawl slowly across the steel bridge. The second friend starts out across the sagging cardboard bridge and he doesn't have the slightest concern about its strength. He's humming a song as he boldly strides across. So, here's the question. Who will make it safely to the other side: the person with the strong faith or the person with the weak faith?

Ask this question and many Christians tend to blurt out, "The person with the strong faith." If that is what you were thinking too, sorry, wrong answer. The person who will make it safely across the river is the one with the weak faith. The one may have a strong faith, but it is faith in a weak bridge incapable of holding a person's weight. While another person may have a weak faith but, as long as it is in a strong bridge, they will make it safely to the other side. I tell this little story with the hope that it helps us understand our Savior's words to us this morning. I pray we listen and grow as we focus today on: **The paradox of Christian faith.** For on one side **we ask the Lord for more faith.** At the same time we are taught to **thank God for the little faith we have is sufficient.**

Has there ever been a time or two in your life when you wonder if your faith is strong enough, wondered if it would even hold up? Perhaps like Habakkuk you've seen too much violence and suffering in the world that you start asking questions. Maybe you have undergone some test or trial that leaves you feeling like you're standing on shaky ground. Perhaps some uncertainty with your health or finances cloud the future allowing the floodgates open and worry and anxiety come pouring in. Or maybe, just maybe, we like the disciples in this lesson look at what God asks of us and we too are left crying out: "Lord, **Increase our faith!**"

What led the disciples to ask for more faith? What left them thinking their faith was not strong enough? Jesus tells them: "**Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.**" Jesus says it is impossible for sin not to be present both in our lives and in the lives of those around us. But this does not mean we are to take sin lightly. Sin is serious. Jesus doesn't want us to have a careless attitude which says "*everyone is doing it.*" Jesus wants us to be careful not to lead others into sin. Don't set a bad example for children with how you talk or what you do! Be careful so you do not cause harm to the faith of anyone who believes in Jesus. It would be better to be drowned in the bottom of the sea. "**So watch yourselves,**" Jesus says. Knowing at times our example is poor at best to those watching us, how do these words make us feel, uneasy? Understanding some of the things we do have led others to join in our sinful actions, even little ones into sin, are we starting to imagine a millstone hanging around our necks? These words are difficult. These words leave us asking for more faith, for a stronger faith.

We need it when we continue to listen to what Jesus asks of us. "**If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him.**" Aren't these two of the most difficult things to do? Do we like going to a fellow Christian and pointing out to them a sin that is harming them, possibly even destroying their faith? I doubt many of you are ready to raise your hand and say "I do." Yet, Jesus tells us to rebuke those caught in sin.

And if and when they repent forgive them. Easier said than done, isn't it? When someone hurts you, for example perhaps they tell others something about you true or untrue to ruin your reputation or put you down, is it simple to forgive them? Say you do forgive them and then they turn around and hurt you again, do you forgive them the next time they say they are sorry? How about the third time, the seventh time? Too often my sinful nature likes to hold a grudge. All too often our forgiveness has limits. We don't want to forgive and forget. It is difficult to forgive other sinners every single time they repent! Again these words leave us asking for more faith, for a stronger faith. When Jesus stands in front of us telling us these things we too want to pray: "Lord, **Increase our faith!**"

There are many reasons for us to pray for a faith that will not shrink. There are many times we could use a stronger faith. And it certainly is not wrong to ask Jesus for more faith and it is certainly wise to fill ourselves with a healthy diet of Word & Sacrament so the Lord might increase our faith. Yet, in Jesus' reply we see the paradox of Christian faith. For although so many times I want more, Jesus reminds us I already have all I need. Did you catch how Jesus responded to the disciples' request? Jesus says to them if you have faith this big (hold up a mustard seed), the size of a mustard seed, great things are possible. You could tell a tree to be uprooted and take a jump in the lake and it will obey. I don't know about you, but I don't consider this mustard seed to be the ideal example of great faith. What good can this one, little, tiny thing do? I can barely see it or hold onto it.

So what is Jesus teaching here with this mustard seed? First, of all Jesus is taking away all of our excuses. Jesus doesn't want his disciples saying they can't do this or they are unable to do that because their faith is too weak. Jesus wants them to use the faith they have to serve and obey! But more importantly Jesus is always working on turning us away from a self-centered focus to a Christ-centered focus. Jesus wants us to keep our eyes on Him. Jesus wants our focus not to be so much on how strong our faith is, but on how sufficient and wonderful is our Savior. Jesus wants us to look to God and His promises for only then will we who are weak be strong. Jesus teaches us to thank God for the little faith we have is sufficient.

So with faith as small as a mustard seed the apostle Peter threw his net to the other side of the boat and suddenly it was filled with more fish than it could hold. With faith as small as a little seed the disciple Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies who were stoning him. With faith as tiny as a mustard seed the apostle Paul faced death and danger across many miles to tell others the good news of salvation. And with faith as tiny as a mustard seed, you and I have been freed from sin, delivered from the devil, and have crossed over from death to life.

For we have all the faith we need as long as that faith is in Jesus. For Jesus willing went to a cross where much worse than a millstone was hung around his neck, for this God hung around Jesus' neck the sins of the world, including all of ours. On the cross where Jesus suffered for the sins of us all, on the cross where Jesus' innocent blood was shed, He declared the wonderful truth that it is finished. Sin is all paid for and life eternal has been won for sinners. We don't need any other proof than Jesus' empty grave! Thank God the little faith we have is sufficient for it depends and relies solely on God's grace. That is why even if we do everything God asks of us, even if we listen to every command and obey his every decree Jesus teaches us to say: *"We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."*

Now go back to that opening story. What is the most important thing – the strength of our faith or the bridge we walk across to get safely to the other side? Thank God He has already provided the safe way – for Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life and no one comes to the Father except through Him. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we have the strongest bridge ever built and the only one that leads safely to heaven. May we now boldly walk on Christ and on Him alone and trust in God at all times. Yes, this is the paradox of the Christian faith – at times we feel weak and insufficient and yet at those times our God remains strong and assures us His grace is all we need. Thank God the little faith we have at those times is sufficient for a bruised reed our Savior will not break and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out. What a blessing it is in good times or bad to be able to confess with the hymn writer: **I know my faith is founded On Jesus Christ, my God and Lord; And this my faith confessing, Unmoved I stand upon his Word! (CW 403) Amen.**