



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 22, OCTOBER 2, 2022
HABBAKUK 1:1-4, 2:1-4; PSALM 37:1-10; 2 TIMOTHY 1:1-14; LUKE 17: 5-10

THE SURPRISE OF COURAGEOUS TRUST

Luke 17:5-10 [The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 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. "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'? 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'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 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!'"]

Chapter 17 of Luke's gospel is something of an enigma. One biblical scholar suggested that when the author felt he had finished the book, he had several more post-it notes around his library, so he dropped a string of non-sequiturs into this section which the NRSV translation captures under the rather mundane header "Some Sayings of Jesus." Luke's got

parables bookending this odd section before Jesus heads to Jerusalem for his final week of life. But here is a hodge-podge of sayings and brief stories that are dropped into our laps. The task it seems is to locate ourselves in context with the struggling disciples.

As I said, this encounter unfolds on the cusp of Jesus' turn toward Jerusalem one

last time, so we are nearing the end, and the disciples are asking, demanding really: *Lord, increase our faith!* They are struggling because Jesus has just told them to carry on, do not stumble nor cause others to stumble, and if one among you does stumble and repents, then the others must forgive. Stick together, stumble, return, forgive. This is the flow of life to which we are called. Literally Jesus says woe to anyone who fails to follow this way.

Of course, we all fail, as did those first disciples, and all who have walked this way since. Be together, stumble, return, forgive. It is really the thesis for the whole of the gospel; for the whole of the Christian life.

The rest of the passage, about slaves doing what they are supposed to do—let's hold that lightly enough in our anachronistic hands to simply say there is perhaps a hyperbolic admonition to not take ourselves too seriously or count ourselves too important. Humility is a virtue as is gratitude for life, and if we can take a few steps back from the rather unsettling imagery of slavery, perhaps we can glean a rather trinitarian sense of the virtues to

which Jesus is calling us—namely, the virtues of faith, humility and gratitude. Let's start with faith.

Brother David Steindl-Rast says that faith is not really about a system of beliefs—some taxonomy of statements that if said enough times might just soak in and color one's religious thoughts. Faith in this sense breaks down when it is quarantined to what we might consider “religious”—that is, only addressing some corner of identity that we mark as religious. That is not faith, and no recitation of credal statements will serve to increase that measure of one's faith at the end of the day. Nor will it inoculate us from stumbling.

Rather, Steindl-Rast suggests that faith is “courageous trust” in life—that the source of life and our aliveness provides all the gifts necessary to experience that aliveness—and to do so in ways that enable us to hope for what surprises us. He even says “surprise” is a good name for God. Surprise happens when we orient to the gift of aliveness that comes in it.

By experience, then, we come to understand ways that courageous trust

and surprise infuse our lives—we can even apply religious language to help understand it—God, Christ, Spirit, prayer, divine energy, and so forth. But the core of faith is that courage to trust in your aliveness as the manifestation of God that comes as a gift to you...that says YES to you.

Which brings us to humility—a virtue not so honored in our modern culture, but one which flows naturally enough when we see all that we have and all that we are as gifts from God. Thomas Aquinas went so far as to say that while humility is not the apex of Christian virtue (that is, of course, love), it is the beginning of all Christian virtue, including love, because without humility, we will not open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Or to say it more emphatically, without humility one will lack faith because the lack of humility, which we call pride, refuses to accede to the reality that aliveness is a gift from God which places a “proper unconcern” on worth, skills, achievements, and status.ⁱ Pride is always concerned with such penultimate matters which stifle the gift of true aliveness in God.

The antidote to pride is not denial of one’s attributes of self-acclaim; the antidote to pride is gratitude, courageous gratefulness when we come to realize that something outside oneself, something not of our doing, is the ground of true meaning, and when we trust that, surprise comes as divine gift.

Gratefulness, or gratitude, is a sermon topic unto itself, but I hope this morning that you hear it as connected to other virtues, and flowing from them. It all has origins in this recognition that the source of our aliveness is a gift from God, and that we are incarnated with all the gifts necessary to experience that aliveness, if we will trust this to be so. Lord, increase our faith!

Today we launch our annual stewardship appeal, inviting you to make a financial commitment in support of Saint Mark’s mission and ministries for the coming year. I suspect at this point, when I mention money and stewardship, I’ve just hit the buzz-kill button for some of you. But if you can hang with me for just a few more moments, I’d like to see if we can come full circle.

First, I hope you've heard be say time and again that this pledge appeal is not about building a budget. That's on par with saying faith is about belief statements. It won't hold water, not really.

No, the invitation to give, and to give generously, and to give gratefully, is not about a church budget; it is an act of courageous trust that all that you have and all that you are come as gifts to you, and if

you are willing and able to step into that truth with courage—that is, with a grateful heart, then I am convinced that the surprise that is God will break into your life in unexpected ways. It is an act of faith, and humility and gratitude to lean into such a way of being.

May aliveness be the gift that comes to you in it all.

ⁱ <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/humility-beginning-and-end-of-virtue/10616416#:~:text=The%20Christian%20tradition%20unequivocally%20affirms.life%20in%20an%20unprecedented%20way.>



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