



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 22, OCTOBER 6, 2019
HABBAKUK 1:1-4, 2:1-4; PSALM 37:1-10; 2 TIMOTHY 1:1-14; LUKE 17: 5-10

JESUS AND THE TELEPHONE GAME

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!'"]

Do you remember playing the telephone game as a child? One person whispers a sentence in the ear of the person next to them, who does the same to the next person, on down the line until the message comes to the final person who reports what they heard. Almost always it is different than what was first said, distorted through the retelling.

Your cathedral staff played the game last week during our staff meeting. I told them it was an experiment, and I brought the

sentences we would use. Knowing of the staff's savvy and erudite inclinations, I did not go easy on them.

The first sentence I whispered into the ear of the one next to me was: "Earl the Ethiopian ate eleven Eclairs in the evening with his espresso." Around the table it went and return to me in final form as: "Earl and Lilly made espressos in the evening."

I next went with church words like chasuble, stole and alb, and so the sentence given was: “A pink chasuble, a sleek stole, and white alb mean the Celebrant is ready for Rose Sunday.” Which became: “And there was something about the Presider doing something on Sunday.”

A good laugh, but notice that Celebrant was converted to Presider, which is the term we use here, since all of us present celebrate when we share Communion.

And the third sentence was inspired by this space and all of you: “A cathedral calls for concrete, colored glass and a cohort of conscious worshippers.” Which became: “There’s a house with many worshippers and many-colored windows inside.” That statement is true and very applicable, but different in detail than the original, right?

I will tell you that when I read this odd passage from Luke’s gospel, I am reminded of the telephone game, because honestly this doesn’t sound like the Jesus I know more abundantly in the gospels.

I have this sense that Jesus said something, the disciples heard, they shared it orally and handed it down over the first several decades until this gospel was written more than a half century after Jesus died.

Do I believe it bears truth and application in our lives today? Absolutely. But I also believe it is interpreted by everyone who hears the words, including us today.

The truth is we, as Americans, cannot really engage any scriptural talk about slaves

without the overlay of racial hatred that is woven into the fabric of our society even still. Some bible translations have abandoned the word “slave” altogether, given the inherent discomfort we have with the term and what it represents for us, and replaced it with words like “servant” or “worker.” Both those terms are still true—slaves serve and work—but neither is an accurate translation of the Greek word “doulos” which was used in Jesus’ time to describe one who had fallen into economic indenture to another who consequently claimed control of their whole life, and often that of their family as well.

Slavery in Jesus’ time was an imperial construct to ensure there was a power dynamic in which wealthy people subjugated others, and many people suffered. Does that sound familiar? Anyone could fall into such a state, and Jesus at every turn was offering a critique against this economic reality, and casting a vision for another way in which all people are honored and dignified. This is the vision of the “kingdom of God”—another culturally relevant term easily inferred in Jesus’ day, but which for us requires interpretation, even as it still holds great value for us to consider.

The disciples yearn for more faith, as we all do if we are honest, but faith is not really about the belief statements. Faith involves placing one’s trust in the Other, even when the experience in that relationship, or shall we say the outcome in this life of faith is uncertain. Having faith, or increasing your faith, will not guarantee wealth or success for freedom from suffering.

It takes courage to have faith, and so we say faith is courageous trust, precisely because we cannot be certain of the outcome. And yet we are drawn to it, we are drawn to this life of “faith” because we know deep down there is something here, something we need, something we yearn to have. We stake our lives on it, which means it demands something of us, everything of us really, because to not do this is to live a small life.ⁱ

We are stopped short when Jesus pivots to this unsettling discourse about slaves doing what is expected of them--worthless slaves just being obedient, it says, although I will tell you I think the Greek translated “worthless” doesn’t carry the dehumanizing intention we may infer today. Doing what is expected doesn’t set up the chance for transformation into a new way of being. Things just always stay as they are, and there is no added value (worth) entering the system by which it might be changed.

Obedience here is not about just doing what is commanded. I remember being so frustrated when my mother told me no to something, and I’d ask why, and she’d just say because I told you so. I wanted to understand something as having deeper meaning.

Obedience is valued in the life of faith, not as a commandment—thou shalt do this, or thou shalt not do that. Why? Because I told you so. That’s not what this life is about.

Obedience is valued as an effort to listen to the voice of faith seated deeply within you, and trusting it, but as Fred Craddock once

said that voice often comes, not in a shout, but in a whisper, and to hear it you must hush, lean forward and trust that it is the very voice of God. It invites you into the transformative experience of new life.

And let’s be clear: that voice of God is seated within every person who has ever lived, and it is the source of our worthiness. There is no one, absolutely no one, who is worthless in the economy of God, the dream of God for all creation, what we call the kingdom of God. And the kingdom is richer, more replete, the more inclusive it is.

This morning we launch our annual fall appeal for pledges to support the mission and ministry of Saint Mark’s Cathedral, which we trust, as a community of faith, is engaged in the work of the kingdom of God here and now. I am very grateful for all who claim this cathedral community as your spiritual home, and I thank you for all the ways you support our common life here, with your presence and time, your sharing of yourselves, and your financial commitments as well.

I’m mindful of so many good things that abound here as result of your generosity. And I am hopeful that those who have not previously made pledges of commitment will do so in this season for the coming year. I hope none of us see it as obedience as being commanded to do something, but rather obedience as intentional effort to listen to that voice of faith, that voice of courageous trust that, by staking your life on it, will transform your life.

And for those who pledge every year, let me gently nudge you: if you give the same amount each year—the same \$500, or the same \$1200, or the same \$2000, or the same \$20,000, whatever it is, if it has become rote, and you're not really pondering it as an act of faith, then I would encourage you to embrace that courageous trust to listen deeply and decide what your giving looks like in light of that listening. It might be the same, or more or less—but Jesus is inviting us all into the work of faithful obedience, with the whole of

our lives, trusting the voice to speak to us, perhaps in a whisper, and we can never be fully certain, but we lean into it trusting that life will be changed, where anything is possible, even the kingdom of God breaking in a bit more into this broken hurting world.

My sisters and brothers, I speak these words in the name of Jesus Christ who invites us into the journey of faith together in this place. I give thanks to God for you, for all of you.

ⁱ This line of thought draws upon the writings of Br. David Steindl-Rast.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!