

Have Faith in Me

Luke 17:5-10

Failed States

Their names have become infamous: failed states, regions that have become the worst places on earth to live. Places where lawless mobs rule, young lives are lost for hopeless political causes. Here are two pictures recording where, last year, UN officials found piles of full ballot boxes in the garbage dump in Haiti. This is the kind of place Dr. Manno has to work in. In failed states, economies are often based on the drug trade. Inevitably, military interventions are seen by the global community as the only response, but this often compounds the griefs and fears of ordinary people. In failed states, it's always the young, old, vulnerable who suffer the worst. Liberia, is our Canadian World Relief project this year – slowly recovering from years of utter chaos. At times, the task of restoring peace and stability must seem monumental.

But in our text today, Jesus says . . .

Faith can move mountains.

When we in media and world relief videos and so forth how relatively small amount of funds and skilled resource people can do so much in world's most desperate situations, we realize that indeed faith can move mountains. There is no place on earth where hope is lost irretrievably. But what's harder to grasp is how, we continue to allow new situations to develop. Rwanda - Darfur – Burma . . . failed states. Why does it take us so long to respond to these situation? Why does help come too late for so many?

As with all human problems, often there is a pattern in the Bible that we fail to see. But when we see it, we can follow it, and solution is already there just waiting for us. There is a pattern that we can follow, the right way, the faithful response, the non-violent, Jesus way that will prevent what otherwise will surely go the wrong way.

As we respond in faith, we can move mountains. As we take the opportunity today to thank God for our many blessings in our land: peace, prosperity, security, we must, if we are people of faith and people of integrity, never sitting idly by and just watch as yet another situation on our world goes from bad to worse.

The New Testament Gospels that we study as the record of Christ's teaching were written by a generation of Christians who had watched. . .

A failed state in the making

Jesus had a great clarity about the events that were about to unfold in Judea. He knew, for example, that Jerusalem and its Temple would be destroyed. This clear vision of this came, first of all, through his own self-awareness of being the Messiah. But his clear vision of where his nation was heading also came through an intimate knowledge of the Law and the Prophets. The whole teaching of the Scripture gave the *hope* that this people would endure. Their future was one in which their god would eventually, at the end of the age, intervene in human affairs and vindicate them *but only after a time of great crisis*. Jesus was convinced that *that* terrible hour was at hand. He foresees the failed state that would exist within a generation.

So he calls down woe on the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites because, in this crucial hour, they are so concerned about matters of ritual purity that they just can't see the huge disease that is

growing. They can't see what Jesus can clearly see. They are heading inexorably towards a disastrous civil war. There is an ever-progressing breakdown in social order. And the *leaders* in Israel have become, in fact, the major cause of the helpless masses lurching and stumbling headlong into the oncoming freight train of judgement. Jesus is, of course, a prophet; but it really doesn't take a prophet to see where this nation is heading. Judea is a failed state in the making. Eventually the situation will develop into what amounts to a *genocide* at the hands of the Romans.

Decades later, after the failure of the Jewish state, the Gospel writers looked back and began to understand that what had befallen them was in fact divine judgment on the generation of Israel which rejected the Messiah.

What might have been different if they could go back and do it all over again? So that in the context of this passage: Jesus as he speaks into this increasingly unstable situation says . . .

Have faith in me

He tells his followers that only way through the trying circumstances of failed national leadership and an oncoming judgement on the nation would be in a recognition that Israel's god had acted in history decisively through him. Count on it. Take it to the bank. Jesus can say, without any reservations, no matter what happens in the coming days, you can have faith in me. Those who acknowledged me as Messiah will, in turn, *be* acknowledged by my Father in that great and terrible day. Believe in me, he said.

But what did it mean for those people to "have faith in Jesus"? Well, he compared it to the simple trust a child has towards a parent. And he even recommends that a person cut off one of their own limbs rather than do or say anything that would jeopardize the faith-journey of another. If you are getting in the way of another person's journey of faith, it would be better if they took you and tied a big rock around your neck and just threw you in the lake! (Jesus said a lot of things we don't take literally)

But he went to the greatest extremes to warn his followers against undermining or putting barriers, stumbling blocks, in the way of the faith of the "little ones" the newbies, the vulnerable, those unfamiliar with the Scriptures. Because their state was descending into its worst days of chaos and disorder and helpless people needed to know that their god still loved them and even though the world was in turmoil, this was actually only the birth pangs of a new creation.

So the word of Christ to early church as it ministered in though these difficult days was, "Be careful that what you are doing in your life doesn't put an obstacle in the way of others who need to believe in God and have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. To properly understand the teachings of Jesus what it means to "have faith in him" the question becomes . . .

Who are the "little ones"?

In Luke 17 Jesus recognizes that there will always be what he calls "occasions for stumbling." He never said that we could avoid facing difficulties and crises in a fallen world. But, he says "woe to anyone *through whom they come.*" There are those who by their privilege or wealth can either make life better or more difficult for others.

Nicholas Wolterstorff writes:

"It is against [God's] will that there will be a society in which some are poor; in his

perfected Kingdom there will be none at all. It is even more against his will that there be a society in which some are poor and others rich. When that happens, then he is on the side of the poor, for it is they, he says, who are being wronged. . .

I want to say, as emphatically as I can, that our concern with poverty is not an issue of generosity but of rights. If a rich man knows of someone who is starving and has the power to help that person but chooses not to do so, then it violates the starving person's rights as surely as if he has physically assaulted the sufferer “

(Nicholas Wolterstorff, Until Justice and Peace Embrace, pp 76, 82)

In the Western World we have for far too long understood the Christian faith as a system of religious beliefs, or at best, “ a personal relationship with Christ.”

But for Jesus, the very essence of faith in him is . . .

The passing on what we ourselves have received

“Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be.”

– Thomas a Kempis

“Everyone wants to change the world, but nobody wants to change themselves.”

– Leo Tolstoy

“We must become the change we want to see in the world.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

“ And just as you want people to treat you, treat them in the same way. “

– Jesus Christ

This has got to be the hardest ethic to live by, but living it out is the only undeniable proof of the presence of the kingdom among us. To live in faith is to continue to forgive and care for the failings of humanity.

Now, Peter, for one, had real trouble accepting this. “How many times do I forgive someone. . . ?” But the point is there really is no limit. Faith in Jesus is an unending cycle of receiving forgiveness and then forgiving others: in forgiving others who show even the most bogus and wavering and superficial forms of repentance, in forgiving them time after time after time. . . *That's faith.*

Frankly, this left the disciples . . .

Feeling inadequate

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

After following Jesus for now some years, they are suffering from donor fatigue. They have been bombarded day after day by so much human need they wonder if there isn't a point at which they will just begin to ignore the human cry. They are experiencing “compassion fatigue”. They can't continue to give of themselves: there is a limit.

Jesus response is that they just don't understand the essence of faith. He says, in effect,

you don't need an increase in it, you either **got it or you don't**. The power of faith that can forgive and forgive, seventy time seven is as much of a powerful force in the universe as the tectonic forces that move mountains and cause earthquakes and uproot trees. If you have any faith at all. A tiny little mustard seed size peice of it, you can do stuff like that. What does he mean? What kind of faith moves mountains? If they want it, the apostles need look no further than. . .

The Old Testament Teaching

In the Old Testament there are numerous passages that urge Israel to have "faith" in the hour of distress. Turn with me first to . . .

Isa 7:9b – "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all."

We dream of a world of justice and peace, a world where things are put right and everybody has enough to live on – the basic necessities. When we're with our family and friends on Thanksgiving Day, it's easy to imagine, that kind of a world – a t least for a moment. But then we turn on the news and it's all out there. The images of unbelievable hopelessness and injustice.

Intuitively, we know there is something wrong with the world and we can't hide from it. And deep down, if we are human, we have a passion for justice. Our favorite moveis and stories in books are of how the underdog against all odds finally triumphs. But all of these imaginations will go nowhere in terms of moving us to act unless we hear a voice beckoning us. Unless we move with the assured belief that the God of the Scriptures is a God who is passionate about justice. Unless we really believe this, we will never change the world.

Isa 28:16 – So this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who relies on it
will never be stricken with panic.

Those who follow Jesus are committed to pray "God's will be done." In the insurmountable challenges to loving our neighbour as ourselves, we know that the foundation is a God of love for whom acting and working for the good of the global community is not optional. So when the opposition mounts, we can hold our ground.

Isa 30:15 – This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says:

"In repentance and rest is your salvation,
in quietness and trust is your strength,
but you would have none of it.

It's easy to be charitable. There's not too many of us who couldn't afford \$10.00. If everyone who attends a Covenant Church gave \$10.00 we would meet our goal for our project in Liberia. The UN has moved in and disarmed the rebels. Refugees are returning. Our World Relief offering will give them food and seed and hand tools and basic sanation and rebuild the damaged bridges. We can easily impact 2500 returning families.

But if we really care, we have to open our eyes, unplug our ears and really hear the cries

of these people.

Hab 2:4 – “ The righteous will live by their faithfulness”

When all other boundary markers that distinguish us from others disappear in a great moment of judgment, national borders, racial and ethnic divides, economic and trade barriers, everything that holds our world together in its uneasy tension, when God removes those things, the true people of God will be marked out from the rest by faith.

And that faith, as far as the Jesus and the Prophets are concerned, is not one simple belief or collection of miscellaneous religious ideas. Nor is it one single quality or virtue. Faith is a distinguishing mark of the true people of God that becomes visible in at the time of crisis. We either have it or we don't. And if we have it, then we really have LIFE.

Jesus goes on to give a . . .

Parable on the Nature of Faith

"Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Will 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.'

I interpret this parable something like this: *Faith* is the *servant* of our hearts. Faith does it work in our hearts and when it's done, the focus is on the Master and what he wants done. Not on us and what we want for ourselves.

Sometimes we in the church in the developed world, can end up with a situation where we believe the nurturing of our “faith” demands elegant places of worship, excellent music, polished preaching and inspiring multi-media presentations. In this culture, the mark of a “successful” church is measured in large numbers of people and million dollar budgets. And to the finicky, church-going public, if those things aren't in place and on offer in one church, they feel starved in their faith and they find somewhere else to go.

What this parable of Jesus is saying is if we want God to bless us and our ministries and our churches then we simply need to find out what God wants and get involved with that.

Because that is what he has already blessed.

And if there is one thing the Scriptures are clear on, it's that God has a special interest in the poor. God is with the poor, and God is with *us* when we are with them. And if that is our faith, then that faith can move mountains.

“ It has to start somewhere, it has to start sometime, what better place than here, what better time than now?”