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October 5, 2025

Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Not Heroes, But Humans

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!’ ”

I love a good list. A grocery list. A to-do list. I love how making a list can reduce a big task into bite size pieces. And I love the satisfaction of crossing things off the list. And, yes, I am the kind of person who adds an unexpected task to the to-do list just for the pleasure of crossing it off as already completed. Also yes, I live and die by my lists, and also sometimes think I can just “remember it all.” Fun fact: I can’t. But for every good and helpful list I actually commit to paper or phone app, I have many more, mostly stored up here—and most of these lists are, well, less helpful. Lists about what the perfect parent looks like, the perfect friends, the perfect pastor, the perfect Christian. The kinds of list that, if I ever wrote them out, I know I would see what a lie they are. But also long as they are up here, I can be sure that if I had a little bit more time, and a little bit more energy, and a little bit more faith, then I just know I could do the really great things and be, just, a really perfect person. That I could solve real problems. That I could do great things for God. But faith doesn’t turn us into heroes. Faith reminds us that we are human.

I take great comfort that the apostles—who have been conspicuously absent for a little while while Jesus has been dining with “sinners and tax collectors” and baiting Pharisees... I take great comfort in the apostles’ plea for more faith. I get their desire to prove to the world they’re in Jesus’s inner circle. I used to be really horrified when Jesus would call them “You of Little Faith,” which happens more often in Matthew’s gospel than in Luke’s. If they have “little faith,” what hope is there for the rest of us? The Lutheran biblical scholar Mark Allan Powell suggests that this is Jesus’s pet name of the disciples. Not an insult but a term of endearment. Perhaps even a word of encouragement. Jesus’s expectation isn’t what? “great faith”? bigger faith? more faith?—not from them, not from us. In fact, Jesus seems to be arguing that faith isn’t really some quantifiable thing at all. It’s like nitroglycerin—only a little bit is needed for a big boom. Only a mustard seed is needed to uproot an established tree, transport it hundreds of miles, and plant it where it

does not grow. But even with my “little faith,” I’m a long way from doing any of that! Am I faithless, then?

It isn’t a surprise that the disciples ask for more faith. They’re surrounded by evidence that more faith means doing better, doing good...er. They’ve been told their whole lives to be good and to keep the commandments and that would mean something. They hear it from the Pharisees in one way, they hear it from Rome in another way. And so do we. This constant refrain beats through our lives, if we can do better, we can prove our worth. If we can prove our worth, we can earn our belovedness.

And this is a moment where that seems to really matter—being better and proving our worthiness and being beloved in the eyes of the world. There is so much to do, I look around and my long list of things the perfect Christian does gets longer every day. I need to write letters, make phone calls, debate opponents, feed...everyone, shelter everyone, clothe everyone. Surely what God needs right now is a hero, right? Surely if I do all these things, God will love me, will never stop loving me? Oh, God, increase my faith!

In 1521, Martin Luther was in hiding at Wartburg Castle. He had taken his stand at the Diet of Worms, and there was a bounty on his head. Tension was high every where—among the reformers as they attempted to clarify their points of view and create a robust theological stance from the protest movement. Political tension was high, too, in Germany and within a few years’ the Peasants’ Revolt would break out. Luther’s friend Philip Melanchthon was despairing over these tensions, over making mistakes and sinning or causing others to sin. Melanchthon wanted to get it right for God, but all he could imagine were the great chasm on either side of him, and how easy it would be to fall in, and, therefore, fall away from God. Luther cautioned him away from these “imaginary sins.” Rather, he said,

If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save people who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.

This is where we pull our motto to “love boldly” from. Sin boldly, and believe more boldly still. Love boldly, and believe more boldly still. But Luther’s great point to Melanchthon is really important, all these finer points of faith, sure we can hash them out, and yes, it looks like we are headed for a crisis in many ways, but, in that case, we still need something simple: mercy, grace, the forgiveness of sins. Not heroics, but humanness.

And that’s the thing. Jesus tells this weird parable about slaves and masters. And...well, it is uncomfortable for us because slavery is wrong. And, yes, the point of this parable isn’t really about slavery, but we live in a world where slavery still exists, where people—their bodies—are bought and sold or made to work to earn their freedom, and we are right to stumble over this passage. How can Jesus make a good point out of a terrifying metaphor? And, Beloved, I don’t know. And I don’t know why Jesus is telling this to the disciples who

were, I think, unlikely to own slaves, but much more likely to know slaves, to be slaves. In the aftermath of the Siege of Jerusalem, the very recent past for Luke's audience, hundreds of thousands of people were taken as prisoners of war, as slaves.

You know, in the Roman Catholic and Anglican mass the priest pours a little water into the chalice along with the wine for communion. Liturgical scholars think this is an ancient practice, dating back to the earliest church whose liturgy was an agape meal—a big, liturgical potluck. The rich brought food from their abundant stores and the poor and enslaved sometimes brought just water, but all ate and were fed. That's where the water is from, at least in part.

So, I can't help but think about this parable being told in the midst of that simple meal, just as we hear it here, anticipating the bread, the wine. This meal that is about loving, and sharing, and forgiveness, and enough for everyone. Not heroics, but humanness. We don't need *more* faith for that. To paraphrase something C.S. Lewis said, God doesn't want or need more from us, God simply wants us.

A few years ago, I picked up an essay collection of the "new books" shelf at the library. It was called *Eat Joy: Stories and Comfort Food from 31 Celebrated Writers*. With a title like that, one would expect these would be stories about amazing feasts and perfectly plated restaurant food. But, to a person, it was about ordinary food moments that crossed culture and class. One writer, Laura van den Berg, wrote about her friend and her friend's sister and the morning they learned their father had had a stroke:

I had been staying with my friend when she got the call;
we went over to her sister's place,
and I can still remember the way she moved around the kitchen
with a sturdy and capable grace.
I can remember her pulling the frittata from the stove
and setting the cast iron pan on a hotplate in the center of the table.
I can remember adding
learn to offer sustenance to yourself and to others in a time of crisis
or really at any time at all
to my 'goals for being an actual adult 'list."

We sat down.
I looked around the table and thought, *I love you both so much it hurts.*
I thought about my friend's sister.
I thought about how sometimes the simple things are the hardest.

The simple things are the hardest. To trust, to feel, to love—none of these are particularly heroic things, great things, they are simple things, human things. They are, in so many ways, the least we can do. Sin boldly, love boldly, Beloved, and believe even more boldly still, trusting, by the grace of God, that it will be enough. Amen.