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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
October 3, 2010 (World Communion Sunday)
Luke 17:5-10
“Doing What Is Expected”

Today’s passage from Luke seems to be a quite “contrary.” At face value its verses appear to have a negative tone, containing a rebuke and an awkward parable. The disciples say, “Lord, increase our faith!” to which Jesus replies, “If you had this much faith (pinch together thumb and forefinger), you could move mountains and uproot forests.” And when the disciples looked perplexed, Jesus compared them to ungrateful slaves, awaiting rewards for simply doing what was expected. It feels right to call this a “contrary passage,” but to do so begs the question – “Contrary to what?” To be honest, the passage says things contrary to what we like to hear. But I’m not so sure that’s a bad thing.

There’s the old line that preaching is meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Jesus often said contrary things, so that people would listen with fresh ears and open hearts to what he was trying to teach them. Because, frankly, we have a real talent for only listening to what we want to hear and believing only that which we want to believe. For example, there’s a book called “The Paranoid Parents Guide,” which points out that parents constantly overestimate rare dangers while underestimating common ones.¹ The Center for Disease Control has listed the five things most likely to cause injury to children. They are car accidents, homicide (usually at the hands of someone they know), child abuse, suicide, and drowning. Yet in surveys, the five things parents worry most about are kidnapping, school snipers, terrorists, dangerous strangers, and drugs. Statistically, the least safe thing we can do with our children is put them in cars and drive them somewhere. We seem blind to the irony of carefully buckling our 8-year old into a government-regulated, Consumer Reports-approved car seat in order to drive him to football practice, where the grim facts about long-term brain damage from concussions continue to multiply daily.

We need some contrary passages in our lives – to re-direct our energies and remind us what really matters. To bring us down to earth. To help us keep things in perspective. The current German Chancellor Angela Merkel was taught this wise lesson by her father: He said, “Always be more than you appear and never appear to be more than you are.” Jesus’ disciples wanted him to teach them more, to increase their faith so that they’d be wiser, greater, and more powerful. But Jesus, in effect, said to them, “Pshaw! It’s not a matter of how much faith you have. With just this much faith, you can do amazing things. Why? Because it’s not about you and your abilities. It’s about God – who gives faith in the first place. Trust and believe, even just this much, like a little mustard seed. And then you’ll understand how God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is good.”

Next comes the really contrary passage – the verses that tell us to be slaves content with following orders and doing what is commanded, not expecting special treatment or

rewards. Now remember our basic rules for interpreting scripture: you read a passage in light of what is right around it, and then in light of the larger book and bible story in which its been placed. Luke 17 begins with a warning not to be a stumbling block for others. If someone stumbles and seeks forgiveness from you, you need to forgive them. If it happens seven times a day, you forgive seven times a day. Next comes the verses about having faith the size of a mustard seed, and to serve without seeking extra rewards. Then comes the story about the ten lepers who were healed by Jesus, but only one of them, a Samaritan, came back to thank Jesus for what he did. So in this handful of verses, we encounter the themes of forgiveness, faith, healing, and gratitude. Hold that thought while I talk a bit about the language of masters and slaves.

In Jesus' time and in the dominant Greco-Roman culture of his age, slavery was quite common. We can talk with some nuance about slavery back then, how in the early church there was not supposed to be a distinction between slaves and free people; and how people were at times released from slavery, such as when Paul wrote to Philemon and asked him to consider setting his slave Onesimus free, since he was now a true brother in Christ. But it is not appropriate to gloss over slavery by simply equating it with being a good worker or servant. It is an abhorrent social category, whose legacy continues to mar American life today and whose reality continues to exist for women, men, and children throughout the world. There is nothing redemptive I can say about the dehumanizing category of slavery that forced Sojourner Truth to demand in 1851 "Ain't I a woman?" and forced African-American sanitation workers in the 1960s to march with signs that literally said "I am a man." The bare minimum I can say is that Jesus mentions the institution of slavery only as a way to illustrate his point.

I began by saying that these verses are "contrary" passages, which begs the question: "Contrary to what?" To which the answer is, "contrary to what we like to hear." If I say Jesus mentions slavery to illustrate his point, that begs the question, "Well, what is his point?" To which I'd reply that Jesus' point has to do with the themes in this whole section of Luke – what it means to have faith, to forgive, to be made whole, to be able to give thanks.

Verse 7 begins by speaking from the position of the slaveowner: "Who would say to your slaves after they've come in from the fields, 'Come sit and join me at the dinner table?'" The answer to that question is "No one." The slave was simply doing what was expected. But in verse 10 the perspective shifts to that of the slaves, who are imagined saying back to their lord and master, "We are your servants and deserve no credit, for we have only done our duty" (NEB translation). Jesus is articulating a very common Jewish perspective here. We are creatures given life by our Creator. We are clay molded into jars and pots by the hands of a loving Maker. Jewish piety would insist that we are created to fulfill the commandments of Torah, and doing so brings no extra reward for such is our intended nature and role.

This same idea is commonly expressed in our Presbyterian theology. John Calvin and others would insist that we are quick to confuse rewards and merits.² There are rewards that come from being in relationship with God, gifts of the spirit, healing, wholeness, and

joy; but such rewards come from the good pleasure of a generous God. They are not merits which we have earned and now God is obligated to provide. We do not hand an invoice to God and insist that we have done this much work and here's what God owes us. That is a worldly approach, focused on us as creatures instead of on God the Creator. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works. Such is God's good will.

Now you can see how the Luke 17 passages hold together. The disciples are challenged to be avoid becoming a stumbling block for others by their actions. They are to forgive generously. This strikes them as a lot to ask, so they cry out, "Increase our faith." Jesus replies that they should not focus on faith as a possession, but rather on faith as a gift – on living in relationship with their Creator, who gives faith and grace and life. Living that way should be a way of life, as self-evident as doing what is expected. In that life, as children of God, they find true freedom. They find true healing, like the lepers who were healed. And their hearts should lead them to respond to all this with spirits of gratitude.

To make sure they got this message, what else did Jesus do? He traveled with them to Jerusalem. He gathered at table with them, and washed their feet like a slave. He heard them fussing over who was to be the greatest among them, and he said contrary words again: "The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For I am among you as one who serves. I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done." (Lk 22:26-27, Jn 13:15) And on the cross, he offered forgiveness praying "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." And on Easter, faith, joy, gratitude, healing, came together on a glorious Sunday morning. Such is God's good news.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Comforting words would talk about how we are all to live together in harmony, how there is much that unites us, and we rejoice in our diversity and different homelands. But such words ring hollow in this day and age of orange-level homeland security threats, of lingering fears about Al Qaeda, terrorist attacks, stranger danger, and general unease. Whether these feelings are reasonable or not, they exist. And they mar the sentiment of World Communion. Which is why we need contrary words – words that say "Do this day what is expected of you. Remember that it's about God, not us. It's about persistent faith and commitment, not getting ahead and cashing in. It's about sitting beside one another and honestly seeing the face of Christ right there, as you hand a tray and say, "The body of Christ broken for you. The blood of Christ given for you." It's about being true, about one faith, one hope, one Lord, one church, one God. Such is the faith we profess and by which we are saved.

AMEN

¹ Lisa Belkin, "To Keep a Child Safe, Just...", *New York Times*, September 19, 2010, p. WK 4.

² Cf. John Calvin, Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke: vol. 2; Lk 17:7-10.