

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
PROPER 22
SUNDAY 6 OCTOBER 2013
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Luke 17: 3-10

“Planting Trees in the Sea”

If somebody sins against you,
forgive him (or her).
And if he or she sins against you again,
forgive him or her again.
7 times a day if need be.

A tall order and hard work.

Work that could be a lot harder in fact than the work of the slave later on in the passage who has to work all day and when returning home has to cook dinner and tidy up afterwards without expecting even so much as a thank you.

Hard work, high demands.

Forgiving is hard work and forgiving the same person again and again will wear down your goodwill and generosity until it comes to a grinding halt where you feel you can do no more forgiving.

For most of us, that point, the point where we come up against the limits of our capacity to forgive, will come well before we've forgiven the same person, for the same thing, for the seventh time on the same day.

You'd have to be a saint or not quite right in the head to be able to keep that up!

Still this is what Jesus says: If your brother sins against you, but repents, even if it is seven times a day, you must forgive him.

Isn't that a bit much to ask? Forgiving, if taken seriously, is not something that comes easily or naturally to most of us, even when sincere apologies are made. It takes time, to let go of the hurt, to let go of the feeling of having suffered injustice and to find the generosity to give the other a clean slate to start all over.

It needs time to create space inside yourself, where you're able to see the other person in a different light, make room for his or her failings and accept them. It calls you to love the other person as they are, warts and all, and trust yourself to them again without hesitation. To go through that process with somebody seven times on one day would be very difficult, wouldn't it?

The apostles answer this command with a deep and heartfelt sigh:
"Add to our faith".

And I think we would probably want to do the same when we hear this command. "Add to our faith", add to the amount of love and trust we can muster so we will be able to be so very generous with our forgiveness and strong enough to let go of our own feelings of hurt and maltreatment over and over and over again. Because we know how hard it is to accomplish such a very hard thing.

Jesus answers to this sigh in this way: "If you had a faith the size of a mustard seed you could say to this sycamore tree "Be rooted up and be planted in the sea" and it would obey you".

Imagine yourself going up to one of the Moreton Bay Figs in the botanical garden, and telling it to plant itself in Bass Strait. Isn't that just a crazy idea? But this is what Jesus says! Faith, even if it is as minimal as a mustard seed can do amazing things, like uprooting a big tree and planting it in the sea. Or in other words: Faith can work miracles.

In itself this is not necessarily a good thing. Jesus himself experienced that at the end of his life when those who regarded themselves as the most pious and faithful of his age bring him to the cross: Blind faith, even in small amounts can be very disruptive and destructive. And perhaps that's why we find this saying of Jesus wedged in between his command to forgive and the story of the slave who has to work all hours without expecting gratefulness because that is what slaves do.

Only faith tempered with forgiveness and hard work for the Kingdom of God will be any good and produce fine fruit. And therefore faith should be firmly wedged in between extraordinary forgiveness on the one hand and hard work at bringing the Kingdom of God about on the other. A message and a command for every person who wants to follow the way of Jesus to work at and to strive for.

There is another way to read this text though. Something else Jesus may be referring to: that faith the size of a mustard seed can not only work miracles in a general sense, but also that it can uproot a big and well established tree in a more particular way. According to that reading Jesus could, in this saying, be referring to the tree of the well established Jewish faith in Jesus' day that was uprooted and planted in the sea of nations for everybody to enjoy its fruits.

The apostles, however small they felt their faith was, managed to do this. With a faith as small as a mustard seed they uprooted the established tree of Judaism and planted it firmly in the sea of the nations. Luke, when he is writing his gospel knows this has happened and, when we read the passage in that way, uses the imagery of mustard seed and tree to encourage the young church that minimal faith and hard work can accomplish the unthinkable. As they have seen happen in their life time.

Forgiving seven times a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year is a lot of forgiving to do. Being asked to move a big and well established tree and convince it to establish itself in the sea is a daunting task. Working like a slave, day in day out, from early morning to late night, even in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, with nobody ever saying thank you or showing any appreciation is a tall order too.

And yet.

That is what we are asked to do by Jesus. To go an extra couple of miles when it comes to generously sharing forgiveness, to letting go of a hurt ego and a scarred self, making room for love and acceptance of the other as a sinner that can be forgiven.

And to work from dawn till dusk for the Kingdom without counting the cost, without even pausing to sit down for dinner, without even looking around for a pat on the back or a quiet word of thanks.

A tall order. Something we might feel is impossible to fulfill.

Add to our faith!

If this is how the world will have to be changed into the Kingdom of God, we might as well give up now! We're not as good as that! We just can't do it! It's out of our reach!

If you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could move this tree and plant it in the sea says Jesus. "God help me with my unbelief!" The disciples respond: "Add to our faith! There is no way we could do something like that, and you know it!"

But the apostles did do it! With their faith they moved mountains and made the tree of faith grow in places nobody had ever imagined it could. They thought they couldn't do it. They knew they could not do it. And yet they did. Not because of the size of their faith, but because the Lord in his graciousness gave them what they needed. Faith, love, inspiration and the power of the Holy Spirit to help them do what they thought they could not do.

Something that has continued through the ages with people gathering around the table of the Lord no matter how many times they went wrong, no matter how much stumbling there was to forgive and forget, no matter how much incompetence and failure marked and scarred the Church and people of faith over time, somehow, mountains were moved and faith kept growing and birds of many feathers were offered nurture and a place to rest, and a view beyond the immediate horizon of the here and now.

As will be given to us. Faith the size of a mustard seed will move mountains, will find the strength to forgive too many times, will find the resilience to keep working like slaves even when we are tired and can't see much progress. Contrary to the slave master in the passage, our Lord does grant us rest and time to be nurtured. He invites us to his table and there supports and encourages us to keep up the hard work. He gives us the faith we lack, making possible the impossible.

The fact that we are here is proof that trees can be planted in the sea and that hard and faithful work coupled with the desire to fulfill the tall order Jesus has given us is enough to make it happen.

The apostle did it. Will we? Amen.