



## NOT WHO BUT WHOSE

October 2, 2016, World Communion Sunday

Luke 17:5-10

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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It is probably never wise to open a sermon by demeaning a person's impassioned life's work, but here goes. There is an online life coach, although he states his actual title as Chief Possibility Officer, who has a thirteen-week coaching session entitled, "Star of your own life, by YOU, starring You." The "you" is in all capital letters. I will readily admit to you that I did not explore this offering any further. It might be an excellent program that is empowering and changing lives. It might be more important to your life than anything I will say this morning. What I can certainly tell you is that it is the antithesis of what I will be talking to you about this morning.

You and I are not the star of this morning's text from Luke, which Caroline just read, neither are the disciples or even, technically, Jesus. The star of this morning's text is actually an unseen character. Unseen characters have often played a role in telling stories, from the sublime and the Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides, to Shakespeare with Rosaline and Samuel Beckett with Godot; to sitcom writers for the old *Odd Couple* with Crazy Rhoda Zimmerman, and *Seinfeld* with Bob Sacamano.

Our text this morning is dominated by an unseen character who is actually the star of the text. And it is not you or me. But before we get to our unseen character, a little context. In the verses preceding our text Jesus tells his disciples that "occasions for stumbling are bound to come." In other words, all of us are going to keep messing up. And then he challenges his disciples to be ever ready to offer forgiveness to others. In fact Jesus tells them to be ready to forgive someone seven



times a day. They can keep on wronging you and wronging you, but as long as they say they are sorry you must forgive them.

And this is where this morning's text begins. In response to such a daunting expectation the disciples have an urgent request. "Increase our faith!" they cry, and justifiably so. Forgiveness is no easy task. The idea that we should forgive over and over again is an exhausting proposition. If they had chosen to respond to Jesus by saying, "Are you kidding me?," I would have completely understood. But they make a perfectly reasonable request, trusting that if their faith is increased they will have a better chance at fulfilling this demanding expectation.

Jesus replies, saying, "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." On a first hearing it sounds as if Jesus is denigrating them for the microscopic amount of faith they have. It sounds as if he is saying, your faith is even smaller than a mustard seed otherwise you would be capable of amazing things. But there is an important nuance lost in the English translation of this. In the original Greek there are two kinds of "if" clauses, "contrary to fact" and "according to fact." Okay, hang in with me. Granted, ancient Greek Grammar is not exactly the most compelling of cocktail party conversation. But this is actually the lynchpin of understanding the entire text. When we hear Jesus say, "if you had faith..." we assume he is saying it as a "contrary to fact" clause. In other words, you knuckleheads do not even have faith the size of a mustard seed. But in this case Jesus is using an according to fact "if" clause. He is actually telling his disciples they do indeed have faith the size of a mustard seed. Their faith is small but even their little faith is enough to do amazing things like send trees flying. Jesus is telling them they have all the faith they need to forgive over and over again. They have all the faith they need to change the world, and maybe even themselves.

Actually, he is really not talking to them all that much about their faith. He is really telling them something about the power of the unseen character of this text, God's Grace. Their faith might be small and imperfect. It might live within them surrounded by confusion and doubt. It might be immature and lacking in spiritual



depth. But it is connected to the most powerful force in all the universe, God's grace; or in other words God's choice in Jesus Christ to love us so deeply that God will reach beyond any and all boundaries we create, to claim us. God's Grace will give their feeble faith all the power it will ever need. The disciples' faith, and ours, is like some ramshackle old caboose. But this sorry excuse for a train car is linked to a ferocious locomotive that will take it wherever it could ever possibly wish to go, and the name on emblazoned on the side of that train is God's Grace.

Right on the heels of Jesus' comment to his disciples about the power of faith the size of a mustard seed he takes a sudden pivot and tells them a story of a slave. The slave is reminded of his place in the order of things. After a hard day's work he is still expected to prepare supper for the master. And on top of that, should not be expecting any special word of thanks for his efforts. It is a harsh story that ends with a harsh message directed at the disciples, "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'we are worthless slaves; we have only done what we ought to have done!'"

Whew. Thanks, for the pep talk, Jesus. If you are trying to motivate us you could take a few lessons from the Chief Possibility Officer. While you are offering us slavery, he is offering us stardom! And what the heck does all of that have to do with the previous verses about us changing the world with our tiny faith? Well they are indeed connected. This tale about the slave is another message about our unseen character, God's grace.

A slave, almost by definition, can never go above and beyond the call of duty. They can never do too much work. They can never earn extra credit for their efforts. Their entire lives are owned by another who unjustly has them at their beck and call. Now, we may not be God's slaves, we have been given the luxurious gift of free will from the divine. But all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. There is no way we can earn extra credit. There is no way for us to be so good in this world that God says, "Wow, you have done so much I am in your debt!" There is no way for us to earn God's Grace. It is not our efforts that



ultimately define our relationship with God. Perhaps it goes unseen, but God's grace looms larger than life, larger than anything else that occurs in our lives.

The unseen character reveals the true narrative, and the truth about our lives. The mustard seed story teaches us that our tiny weak faith, emanating from our very imperfect selves, is enough to change the world because God's grace stands beside our faith, beside us. This slave story teaches us that there is no possible way we can earn this powerful gift of God's grace.

On this World Communion Sunday we are reminded that Jesus Christ has extended an invitation to one and all across the globe to come to this table and be fed. Since the earliest days of the church, people have tried to create rules about who is welcome at this table. They have sought to fence off the table from one group or another. The church in Corinth had issues with who shared a table with whom. Some have said that only people from the same denomination are allowed to come to the table. Others have said only those who have properly confessed their sins may come. Still others have said only those who are baptized may come.

We have not, we will not, we could not do anything to ever earn a place at the Lord's Table. And yet, with God's grace by our side, we are welcomed and fed, again and again, one and all. With all of our personal imperfections, failings, and peccadillos, with our inconstant and weak faith, we are escorted to the table by, you guessed it, God's grace, who seats us and pulls up a chair beside us. God's grace empowers us to uproot whatever stands in our way, God's grace is strong enough to transform even the likes of you and me into world changers for God's sake.

Most of us are familiar with the old saying, "It is not what you know but who you know." It is a slightly cynical trope suggesting that we do not get ahead in this world so much on our own ability as we do on cronyism. Well, if you were looking for a parallel expression regarding how invitations are handed out to the table before us this morning it would be, "It is not who you are but whose you are." However there is no cynicism to be found in this little aphorism. The truth is we



are people who are deeply flawed. And we can never do enough to earn what we are being offered this morning. It would serve us well to spend a little less time trying to be the stars of our lives and a little more time recognizing who stands beside us through every step of the drama and comedy that fills our days.

We are capable of amazing things. But the force that makes it all possible is not found in any spotlight that shines upon us but rather in the unseen character by our side. The theologian Robert Farrar Capon writes this about the transformative power of God's grace, "the impossible can seem easy as pie and as sensible as shoes."<sup>1</sup> It is a lovely turn of phrase. Another way to say it might be, God's grace guarantees that the unlikely lot of you and I are ever invited to be fed by God's hand and thus nourished to do the remarkable.

Gods' Grace, that is where the spotlight belongs.

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Capon, Robert Farrar, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgement*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1989, p. 320.

