

“Uprooted”

Rev. Stephen Milton

Lawrence Park Community Church

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Luke 17: 1-10.

We are in the fourth week of the season of Creation today. For a very long time, people who believe in God have looked to nature to discern the mind of God. God created all of this, so presumably, we can deduce something about God from the design of the world. The great British biologist J.B. S. Haldane was once asked by some theologians what he thought God was like. Haldane responded that God must have an inordinate fondness for beetles and stars, since there are so many of them.

We live in an age when we like information to be straight forward and easy to understand. But anyone who has studied biology knows that if God created all of this, God likes abundance and complexity.

And this applies to even something as simple as an apple. (Hold an apple in my hand) At first glance, an apple seems pretty straight forward. It is a fruit from a tree. It contains sweet flesh and seeds. But hold an apple to the light, and the complexity increases. The apple casts a shadow. The shadow looks like the apple, but is not the apple. Yet, shadows are real, and can be quite beautiful. They are and are not the same as the object which they resemble.

Hold an apple up to a mirror or a camera and we see the apple once again. The image or reflection looks like the apple, but is not the apple.

Now, if you close your eyes, you can imagine the apple in your mind's eye. It is the apple, and it is not the apple, since there is no apple in your head. The same is true if you remember this apple later today. You can open your eyes. If I leave this apple in the courtyard and it begins to rot, people walking by will be able to smell the apple, even if they can't see it. The apple will have cast a kind of olfactory shadow, like the apples in the poem that opened today's service. The scent of the apple is the apple, and it is not the apple.

Apples can be objects, but also reflections, shadows, images, memories, even symbols, like the apple Adam and Eve ate. All at once. This is true for everything in creation. None of it is simply itself. If God created this world of shadow and light, objection and reflection, then we can deduce that God's mind is subtle, nuanced, and multi-dimensional.

And so, if we are to come closer to thinking and acting in a God-like way, we should not expect our guidance to be straightforward and simple. It may be necessary when talking about Godly truths to approach them indirectly, using shadows and reflections - this is why Jesus often speaks in parables, in stories and strange turns of phrase. Jesus is using metaphors and language like shadows and reflection to get us to see the apple of truth more clearly. Jesus talks the way God thinks.

Yet, in our time, this is not how many people view religion. We are living at a time when people want to see religion as straightforward. The loudest voices in Christianity are often the ones who present the faith in the simplest terms. They present it as a set of straight forward rules that should be obeyed. Anyone who fails to obey those rules is a heretic or an enemy of the faith.

Two weeks ago, in the United States, a memorial was held for Charlie Kirk. He was a loyal Trump supporter who embraced most of Trump's racist, sexist and anti-democratic values. He presented Trumpism and Christianity as partners. The Christian nationalist vision he promoted on campuses all over the country was a faith that was designed for white men and their loyal wives. Kirk, like Trump, suggested to college kids that the greatest thing they could do for their country was to get married and have white kids, and keep immigrants out of the country. For Kirk, Christianity was simple and straightforward. It calls for white Americans to be in charge of society, promoting Christian values. Immigrants should be kept out, black people and queer people should be treated like second class citizens. Kirk and Trump's version of Christianity is straightforward and easy to understand. It is also defined by bitterness against others, with a desire to persecute anyone who does not agree.

As Christians, we are told that if we want to know the mind of God, we should turn to scripture, especially to the words of Jesus. And in today's scripture reading we are reminded that when Jesus speaks, he does not speak in a straightforward way, using the kinds of words that might work at a political rally. Instead, he speaks with nuance and even indirectly. And it is this approach which reveals that he speaks with the mind of God, to us and for us. So, this morning, I would like to slowly walk through what Jesus says in this piece of scripture.

Jesus begins by saying that in our spiritual lives, we will all stumble from time to time, we will make mistakes. That is to be expected. But woe to the person who causes believers to stumble. Those who lead the believers astray would be better off if they had a big millstone around their neck at the bottom of the sea.

Ok, so it sounds like he is saying, beware of the deceivers and those who would mislead you. That would be straightforward.

But then Jesus says to his disciples - "so watch yourselves." Hmm. Jesus has just said that believers will often stumble, that's to be expected. So why would Jesus tell the disciples to watch themselves? This suggests that Jesus isn't saying watch out for other people who might lead you astray. Instead, he is saying that his disciples better make sure that they do not lead anyone astray. After all, these men will be the teachers of the faith once Jesus is gone. They are

the ones who might mislead people. So Jesus is asking them to have the awareness that they might be a problem for others if they misunderstand the faith.

Jesus then gives a concrete example. Imagine if someone has sinned against you. They sin, then they come to you repentant, asking for forgiveness. Imagine if this happens over and over again. What should you do? Jesus says you should forgive them, even if they sin and repent seven times a day. It takes a lot of compassion to do that.

Remember that apple? The one that had a reflection and a shadow? Let's think of this situation in terms of all the angles, the reflections and the shadow. If someone comes up to you having done you wrong and repents, how does that make you feel? You probably feel hurt that they sinned against you. Perhaps you are dealing with someone who is in a bad mood, and shouted at you. Or someone who has an addiction and stole some money from your wallet or purse. You find this behaviour annoying, frustrating, it may even make you angry.

Now, let's see this from the other person's point of view. They have sinned against you. But, the fact that they keep coming back to repent suggests that they are of two minds about this. Part of them wants to sin, to shout or to steal. But then their conscience kicks in and they repent. They are torn. Some part of them is trying to be good, yet it is hard, they are fighting old habits and impulses. Yet they are trying, and presumably, if they keep trying, they will one day succeed, and stop their hurtful actions. Conscience will win over impulse.

So what should you do, if they come seven times a day repenting, but still sinning? I think realistically, many of us would run out of patience. We might get fed up and refuse to forgive them. But how will that make the sinning person feel? They may reach the conclusion that no one is on their side, that the change they are trying to create in themselves is too hard. They may give up, so their impulses will win.

Remember that Jesus said that many may stumble, but woe to the one who causes another to stumble? Who do you think is causing the stumbling here? The sinner, or the one who will not forgive? The one who refuses to forgive is the stumbling block. And why do they stop forgiving? They run out of patience, and they probably become bitter and resentful of the person who keeps stealing from their wallet or shouting at them.

Not surprisingly, when the disciples hear this scenario, they fear they won't have the faith to be forgiving enough, so they say to Jesus "increase our faith!"

Then Jesus replies with a strange image. Jesus says that if you have faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could tell a sycamine tree to uproot itself and go plant itself in the sea.

Wow, so if we had just a little bit of faith, we could order a tree to jump into the sea. Cool, what a great super power. But this is obviously impossible, so how is this helpful?

Remember what I said about God thinking in multiple dimensions? That's at work here, too. The sycamine tree was known for having very deep roots, deep enough to reach the water table deep underground. They were very hard to uproot. Even if they were chopped down, they would

grown again. They also had very bitter fruit. Rich people had mulberry trees with their sweet fruit. Poor people, like Christ's disciples, had sycamine trees. Their fruit was bitter and could only be tasted a little bit at a time.

So, Jesus is saying, if you had just a little faith, you could get rid of your bitterness. But bitterness is often very deep rooted. It feels like its tendrils have gone into every part of our body. That kind of bitterness can make it very difficult to forgive a person once, much less seven times a day. And Christ is not saying that you should be able to get rid of that bitterness on your own. Instead, you need God's help. That's faith, even just a mustard seed's worth. You need to be willing to say God, I don't have the strength to uproot this bitterness. I need your help. That surrender to God is what can relieve you of the bitterness and make you more capable to forgive.

Now, the risk is that people who surrender to God, who say they are on God's side, may become proud of themselves. We're God's people, we have a direct access to God, we're God's favourites. Pride has a way of slipping in. For people who fall prey to that kind of temptation, the world gets divided into the people who are with God, and those who are against God. They can tell stadiums and entire countries that if you don't choose our faith, you are the enemy, you deserve to be persecuted and blamed for all society's problems. We're the chosen ones, we are God's favourites.

Jesus understands that this is a risk. He can see the shadow that faith can throw. He can see that people who feel they are close to God may think they will be at God's table while everyone else is out in the darkness. So, Jesus tells one last story. There was a man with many slaves. Once they had done their tasks in the field, they thought they deserved to sit at the man's table to have dinner with him. But they are still his servants. They deserve no special recognition for following his instructions. Instead, they should continue to serve him at the table, and then eat later. Faith does not give us permission to brag about how close we are to God. We are all still God's creations. And if we want to follow God's ways, then we should be clear that this does not make us more special than others, more deserving of praise.

Instead, we are encouraged to be humble and forgiving. We are to help those who stumble. To help those who sin and get in trouble, to keep them safe when they are in danger. We are called to feed the hungry in the years when they cannot feed themselves. We are to share the gospel of a man who when he was nailed to a cross in front of jeering crowd offered forgiveness to those who killed him. God's way is not easy if we cling to pride and bitterness. But God is always there to help us uproot what holds us back if we ask for help. God's will is to help us take the millstone off our necks and float back up to life. Where we can be a blessing to ourselves and others, to help others when they stumble. Freed from bitterness, we can become the apple of God's eye.

Amen.

