

Sermon – 16th Pentecost
Luke 17:1-10
October 6, 2019

“NO TOUCHDOWN DANCES FROM THIS TEAM.”

A few years ago, a commercial for United Airlines depicted a raspy voiced football coach laying into his team at halftime. He wasn't at all happy about his team's play, several instances where the opposing defense “got to our quarterback”, and Lord knows what else had him pretty bent out of shape. When his tirade ended, there was a pause – then one of the linemen, all sweaty rubbed the nose of his square-jawed face and said “coach...aren't we ahead by 35 points?” And the coach lit up again, saying “you see, that's what I'm talking about. As soon as you're satisfied as a football player, we're finished as a football team.” Out the locker room the team charged, ready to put up another 35-point half – then fly home satisfied on the friendly skies!

Our Lord is having a talk with his followers in our lesson today – grown men who'd had little of what you'd call “normalcy” for three years, traveling one end of Israel to the other, staying in stranger's homes if they were lucky, dealing with all sorts of opposition, and he says to them... “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!’” A decent if imperfect effort seems worthy only of a call to ‘step it up’. Little wonder they ask for “more faith” - things seem to be getting harder, not easier.

Regarding their lifestyle Jesus said “if you cause someone to sin, it would be better if you tied a millstone around your neck and were thrown into the sea.” - a word to the sinner in us that likes to think we're self-sufficient and morally free creatures. Regarding our dis-inclination to forgive, Jesus said “if someone sins against you and asks forgiveness, forgive them - even seven times a day.” Christianity is a great game plan but not an easy one to execute. Forgiveness is hard – which is why the grace to do so has to come from outside ourselves – from the forgiveness we've already received in Christ.

Yet even when asked for the faith to do that very thing, Jesus offered only more hard words. Or did he? You see we tend to hear the apostle's request to “increase our faith” arising out of the demands of the preceding verses about forgiveness and temptation. It's not difficult to picture in our mind's eye ‘big ol interior lineman Peter’ - “the original rock” wiping his face with a towel, saying “Lord, we've given up everything to follow you- families, homes, livelihoods. Road trips, the Roman government and the Pharisees play hard too you know. What more do we have to do?”

It would be easy to see this as exasperation – a ‘throw in the towel moment’ – an admission that the stamina or the skill set for Christianity is hard to come by. But faith does not need to “increase” – and even if it did we'd somehow want to “keep score” and the sinner in us might start looking for a medal to pin on our chest. Jesus' says faith can do great things, even as he makes it

sound as if faith is supposed to be fragile – barely hanging on in fact - mustard seed size. If by faith one can do what is needed in the moment, when a mountain of sin or suffering comes our way and we get past it, one can also do what is commanded of us by our Lord.

The example Jesus draws on of slaves who have no right to expect even simple thanks from their master for their labor sounds like God is a life coach who's never satisfied. It only tells us to be humble about doing what we were created to do – bear the name of Jesus. My goodness, what an example of that just this week in a courtroom in Dallas, Texas, when a man rose to forgive his brother's killer moments after she was found guilty. In his explanation to the 1st Petition of the Lord's Prayer where we pray "*hallowed be thy name*", Luther said "*God's name is hallowed whenever his word is taught in truth and purity and we as children of God live in harmony with it.*" Man alive there was a lot of harmonizing going on in that courtroom this week.

Nothing in our lesson from Luke says we need to keep inventing new things to do – there are no ovations for the modern heresy that the church or the Christian with the busiest schedule is the most faithful. However, neither does anything in this lesson give us license for the all too common "touchdown dance." We as Christians are to act like we've been in the end zone before - charity, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control are plays the church always runs, because they always work.

I don't know what kind of aspirations you have for your life or what sorts of regrets may be waging their finger at you, but I'll tell you, when you can forgive a person who has hurt you – and not for the first time, you can do a lot of wonderful and even hard things as well - not incidentally forgive yourself for whatever in your life should have been or never was. I don't know how you want to be remembered. But if you call an occasional time out and pray asking Jesus if you might be pressing the boundaries of your Christian liberty too far – living that kind of life that someone who needs Christ to rescue theirs could misread, you'll be moving a mountain all right – one called pride.

Jesus is your Lord, who can bark at you if he wishes - but he is so by virtue of his servanthood. John 8 tells us he was the one whose writing in the sand made righteous men turn away and stones fall from their hands – even if they thought they had the game with an adulterous woman in hand. Jesus is the one whom Paul said "*did not count equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, becoming a servant.*" This Savior to whom your knee, every knee will one day bow and your tongue, every tongue confess that he is Lord – got on his knees and washed the feet of a man who would betray him and another who would deny him. No, you don't need a lot of faith dear friend, just faith in a Savior like that. He'll take it from there. AMEN