

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time "C" Corpus Christi 2010

Luke 17: 5-10

Consider the mystery of the seed. Nothing looks less impressive than seeds. What importance could possibly be attached to something so tiny and trivial? But, appearances can be deceiving.

We put the seeds into the ground and go our way. We sleep, we rise. A wonder transpires. A miraculous, imperceptible process unfolds. Eventually the tiny seeds becomes a garden or a bountiful harvest.

More than once Jesus referred to seeds in his teaching. The Bible is full of agricultural metaphors. People lived much closer to the earth then. Still, if you ever planted a seed you can relate to Jesus' references to seeds.

The background to today's gospel reading is this: The disciples are finding Jesus' requirements difficult and demanding. He says that everyone will inevitably face temptation, but he condemns all those who are responsible for leading another person into sin.

It would be better if such people had millstones hung around their necks and were cast into the sea! Jesus also has a radical bit of instructions on forgiveness.

No matter how many times others sin against you, whenever they repent you must forgive them. This is so completely overwhelming to the disciples. They exclaim to Jesus, "Increase our faith!"

This is the actual context of Jesus' teaching about the mustard seed. It is not that the disciples are so high-minded that they come asking Jesus for greater faith.

Rather, they find his requirements so daunting that they cry out, "Increase our faith!" - as if to say, "This is too much! Who do you think we are? "

Jesus' response seems to be a reprimand. "If you only had faith as a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea, ' and it would obey you."

But the Greek language has two kinds of "if" clauses. One expresses a condition contrary to the fact like (if you only had a bit of faith! "), and the other expresses a true condition like ("If you had faith like you do, then..").

Jesus is not rebuking them for their lack of faith, but affirming the faith they already have. He is inviting them to embrace the full possibilities of their faith. He is saying, "You already have enough faith to do what I am asking-- to avoid leading others astray and to extend the gift of forgiveness.

To fulfill the demands of Christ in relation to another person is not an overwhelming or daunting assignment. We are not being asked to do the whole job of redeeming or transforming other people. That is God's work.

We are simply to sow the seeds in our relationships with others, trusting that God will oversee the consequences. For example, here are three kinds of seeds anyone can sow. They may seem small, but this is the nature of seeds.

First, there are the simple seeds of sympathy. It doesn't sound like much, just a feeling. Sometimes it is even a patronizing feeling. Yet some of the people who have helped each of us must have done so with nothing more than the caring that sympathy represents.

It is a God-like thing to take into your heart a part of another person's pain. Could we collect and tabulate all of the expressions of gratitude humans have exchanged with each other, one of the most frequent would be, "I am grateful because, when I needed it most, you cared."

Caring, often expressed simply in listening, is a powerful seed. Sow it, and see what God can produce.

Second, there are the seeds of small deeds. Not heroism. Not great works. Small deeds. Seeds. When you are responding to an ill or a bereaved person, you may wish there was more you could do than send a card or drop off a dish.

Do you wonder if such things really matter to the one who is suffering? You probably don't if you have ever been on the receiving end of such things. When you are the hurting one, no expression of concern is insignificant.

Someone's simple hug may remain in your memory forever. Small deeds are often experienced as enormous acts of caring and love.

Third, there are the small seeds of simple words. There comes a time to speak, to speak up, to speak out, to say something. But you are only one voice. And you're not sure what to say.

What difference can your words make? One voice can incite a riot. A few words can bring sanity back to a frenzied family. The three words, "I love you," are the most powerful words in the world. Speak of your caring and your words will heal.

Today's Gospel passage concludes with a parable from Jesus about service. The parable is based on the **slave/master** relationship that was common in the first century.

Jesus, by the way is not endorsing slavery when he uses it in a parable. Jesus' point is that the master and the slave both understand and accept the slave's obligation.

The slave does not expect to be treated as an equal, nor does he expect to be thanked for his service. The master commands, the slave obeys. God is our master, and we are God's servants.

Even when we have done everything God has commanded, according to Jesus, we should say, "We are unworthy servants," Why? Because we have only done our duty.

Such an attitude is in serious conflict with the pervasive egocentricity of our time. We cannot imagine becoming so drastically subservient to anyone, even God.

We must remember, however, that Jesus saw himself as God's servant. He asked for nothing more than to do the will of God. St. Paul also referred to himself as God's slave. The gospel refers to God's goodness and love, to be sure, but it also refers to our loving obedience as God's servants.

God's goodness must be received as grace (unmerited favors), not as payment for our services. God is never in debt to us. The true servants of God understand that the only true glory is in utter submission to the will of God.