

20 Pentecost, Proper 22, Yr. C

October 2, 2016

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-10; Luke 17:5-10

I'd like to begin this morning by clearing away what could be a distraction and that's the second half of today's Gospel, in which it sounds like Jesus is calling the disciples not only slaves, but worthless slaves besides! A couple of notes about this. First of all, the word translated as slaves could also be read as servants and some early manuscripts leave out the "worthless" part. In addition to that, please remember that Jesus himself, later in Luke, refers to himself as a servant, saying that he came to serve, not to be served. It's a text that has to do with a couple of things: first of all, it deals with the duty that comes with being chosen. We're chosen, not because we're extra cute or extra smart or extra virtuous. We're chosen because God wants us to participate in the new creation. I've mentioned this before, but I'm always put in mind of the phrase that leads in to the Preface of the Eucharist: That we have been made a new people in Jesus Christ to show forth God's glory in all the world. And you'll remember that to say showing forth God's glory means to show the world God's face, or God's essence, who God really is. That's what we've been chosen for; that's what we're supposed to be about. In every aspect of our lives, we're to be living in a way that shows God's goodness and love, God's FACE to the world. And we don't get any kind of gold star on our papers for doing that: it's just who we are. It's like those policemen and firemen who risked their lives to save other people on 9/11. When asked about their heroism, they just say, "We were doing our jobs. You're not a hero. Even if you save somebody's life. Just saving a life is reward enough. But it's your job." Or it's like that community in Vichy France which sheltered so many Jews during WWII. You'll remember that when refugees came to their doors and asked to come in the reply invariably was, "But of course." So chosen: chosen to serve; chosen to accept the duty to show God to the world by loving, forgiving, serving. That's reward enough.

Having looked at that, let's turn to the first part of the Gospel reading, the part about having faith. The theme of faith runs through the Habakkuk reading, the psalm, the letter to Timothy and this part of the Gospel. First the context. The disciples have just heard Jesus telling them what discipleship is all about: don't scandalize those weaker than yourselves, don't lead anyone astray, be careful of wealth, forgive people who offend you over and over again, in Luke, Jesus says 7 times a day. So when we come in this morning and they're saying, "INCREASE OUR FAITH!" I think they're also saying something like Good Grief! How in the world are we supposed to do all that?

The answer, of course, is faith. And there are a couple of language issues here. "Faith" in the Hebrew can be translated as "steadfast love" or "trust" – so, "faith" doesn't primarily mean belief, as in some kind of intellectual assent. Faith is more about a trusting relationship and what you come to know and how you're empowered to live based on that relationship. Faith, or trust, is a way of looking at and living in the world. There's another thing here. Sometimes reading the Bible is a little like reading e-mail – even with emoticons, it's sometimes hard to get the intent, the tone of the person writing. So, here, it can be read as if Jesus is chastising the disciples because they don't have enough faith. But, it turns out that the Greek "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed..." can be read as "if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, AND YOU

DO..." you could accomplish great things. In that sense, it means that even the small amount of faith we do have is enough to do what God has called us to do, because we aren't doing it alone, our little faith is joined with, as N.T. Wright says, a GREAT GOD. So faith and trust. Speaking of trust, have you heard the story of the two nuns who worked in a nursing home. One morning, on the way to work, they ran out of gas and found themselves stranded alongside a busy highway. They decided to walk to a gas station, but they didn't have any kind of container to carry the gas; then one of them remembered that there was a bedpan in the back of the car. So they used that, got the gas, got back to the car and were pouring the gas into the tank from the bedpan. A family drove by just then, stopped and stared in disbelief. Finally, the father blurted out, "Now that's what I call faith!"

Levity aside, there's a lot pushing back against trust these days. The air is filled with invitations to distrust, to selfishness, to suspicion and paranoia. We can see it in some of the political rhetoric, in the diatribes against certain people, or races. It seems that these days a lot of us are only willing to trust those who are like us – who look like us or talk like us, or share our culture, or our religion. There's pressure to make the move to "us" against "them" – to separate ourselves – there's talk of fences, barriers, walls. There's fear and the kind of exploitation that comes with fear. I recently saw a T-shirt that may be the name of a rock band (?) but is perhaps something we, as Christians should all be wearing: it just said NO FEAR.

Some of that dynamic is what's going on in the Habakkuk reading. Israel is in a mess. Wherever the prophet looks he sees chaos and destruction; he sees war, violence, injustice; he sees the wicked triumph and the good ground underfoot and he cries out to God: HOW LONG? When are you going to make this right? He knows that God created a world and a kind of life that is well-ordered and that make sense. He knows that God is a God of justice and he's wondering why the wicked are flourishing and the good suffering. It's all backward, he thinks. So he challenges God. He climbs up to the rampart and says that he's going to stay there until God answers his questions. And God does answer - telling the prophet to write what God says in letters large enough so that even runners going by will be able to read it – that there is a vision that will be realized in the end. It may seem to us, with our limited vision, to take too long, but trust, wait for it. Have faith. Trust me.

The psalm picks up this same idea: Don't "fret" yourself because of evildoers, put your trust in the Lord, be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Patience, and trust that somehow, when all is said and done, the world will be what God created it to be. That justice, peace and God's love will have the last word. Faith is what gives us this vision and what allows us to have this trust and patience.

Frederick Buechner, in his usual inimitable way, has this to say about humans and what we believe:

"People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a

day's. They are prepared for a mustard=seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage supper of the lamb. (quoted in Synthesis 2010)

Our vision is too small, is what he's saying. We need a longer view, a more trusting view. Those of you who attended the retreat that the bishop gave here last year, will remember that he finished his meditations with one from Julian of Norwich. She was a woman who lived in times much more turbulent even than ours, but she had a series of visions that she recorded and that have offered consolation to the generations following her. The one the Bishop used and that I'd like us to remember is the one in which Julian saw God holding something in his hand that looked like a hazelnut. When she asked what it was, God said that it was all that had been created, that he had his hand upon it and would never let it go. From that vision, Julian was able to write those lines for which she is best known: All will be well and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.

We are rooted in God's love; no matter what happens, God will never let us go. Amen.