

The Rev. Duane A. Jesse, Senior Pastor
Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, October 6, 2019
17th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 27/Proper 22/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 17:5-10
Sermon Title: “2020 Vision – Part 1 – Increase Our Faith!”

Theme

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus instructs his followers about the power of faith and the duties of discipleship. He calls his disciples to adopt the attitude of servants whose actions are responses to their identity rather than works seeking reward. This first week of our annual stewardship campaign we will be reminded that faith is like a muscle, it must be exercised, and good personal stewardship is a good way to exercise that spiritual muscle.

Text

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶The Lord replied, “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.

⁷“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? ⁸Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So 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!’ ”

Sermon

It's that time of year again. Time for our Annual Stewardship Campaign. Since the campaign really is about our 2020 financial commitment to our church's ministry and the church's 2020 budgeting process, I've entitled the campaign, "20/20 Vision." The name of the campaign is of course borrowed from the eye-care field. 20/20 vision is a term used to express *normal* visual acuity measured at a distance of 20 feet. And to keep you engaged, I will be using all sorts of vision and sight words in the sermon. Keep count and I will tell you how many I think I've used at the end. By the way, there have been five so far.

The title of this first installment in the "20/20 Vision" series is, "Increase Our Faith." This phrase, of course, comes from the request of the Jesus' disciples. What the Gospel Reading doesn't tell us is what triggered that request, and to learn that, we have to go back a few verses.

¹Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ²It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble."

Jesus taught his disciples that once someone comes to faith, they, now the faithful are to behave differently. For example, the first thing he taught was that we had better not cause "one of these little ones to stumble" into sin.

"One of these little ones" refers to anyone regardless of size or age who is new to the fellowship of the faithful, the church. The rest of the fellowship of the faithful is to have special concern for them, because they need to be taught and corrected if they are to become mature in their faith.

I like Jesus' use of the word "stumble" here, because it explains much of our sinfulness. No one wants to stumble, and in the same way, most of the time we don't want to sin, but as we all know, sin happens. I saw it on a bumper sticker so it must be true.

So why does Jesus seem to indicate that causing one of these little ones to stumble is a bigger deal than stumbling ourselves? Because when we stumble and cause one

of these little ones to stumble, now two have stumbled. The best way to not cause one of these little ones to stumble into sin is by avoiding stumbling into sin ourselves, as best as we are able, and so that these little ones don't **see** our bad behavior and think that it is acceptable when it is not.

But then Jesus up'd the teaching. Not only are we supposed to not cause another to stumble into sin, we are supposed to correct them if they do! This, I will agree, is difficult for us to do. Typically, I think that when we **observe** sinful behavior in another, especially a stranger to us, we turn away and act like we didn't **see** it. "It's not my business," we say, and we **look** the other way. But Jesus taught that that is not the way the faithful behave within the fellowship of the faithful. For example, if you **see** me walking toward a pot hole in the parking lot, I expect you to warn me, and you should expect me to do the same. It's the same for sin. If we **see** another headed toward sin, or already mired in sin, we should warn them.

And, Jesus went on,

³"Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

"Rebuke" is not a word we use often.

Rebuke – to express sharp disapproval or criticism of (someone) because of their behavior or actions.

So Jesus said, that within the fellowship of the faithful, when we **see** sinful behavior in another we are to express sharp disapproval of their sinful behavior. Church, most of us are not very good at this and as I have thought about it, there are at least three possible reasons. 1) We don't rebuke because we don't know how and we don't want to offend people. 2) We don't rebuke because we simply don't want conflict. And 3) We don't rebuke because we don't love them enough.

Allow me to give you an example of the last one; we don't do it because we don't love them enough. I had 21 years of training to throw my dirty clothes on the floor where Mom could find them. When Carol and I were married, she told me that that

was unacceptable with her. Did she rebuke me badly? No, but if she was going to be able to stick it out with me, another way of describing her love and commitment to our relationship, then this behavior had to be nipped in the bud. On the second day of our honeymoon, I did better.

I want you to **look** around the room. Do you love these brothers and sisters? I do. And I certainly do not want to **see** any of you stumble into sin. But rebuking is difficult, I know. I've done it as a supervisor of people that worked for me, and I've done it as a pastor of this and other churches. And it is to these teachings, and more than teachings, exhortations, that the disciples asked emphatically, "Increase our faith." They seem to realize that to be this concerned for the spiritual well-being of others within the fellowship of the faithful will take more spiritual stamina than they have within them at that time.

Now Jesus' response to their request is *not* what I think is an appropriate response. In fact, I wish he didn't say what he did. I think that he should have welcomed someone asking for more faith, don't you? Instead he seems to indicate that they have enough faith, they just need to put it to use.

So what I am going to say next is my teaching, not Jesus' but I think it is what Jesus meant to say but didn't. Faith is like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it will become.

You all have some faith or you wouldn't be here. And I think one reason people come to church is probably to increase their faith through the teaching of the church. But I can teach you about increasing your faith till the end of the age and if you do nothing with it, what good is my teaching? None! So the church, this one and all other good Christian churches, provide ways for you to steward your faith, and in stewarding it, you will increase it. I promise you.

Back to the Gospel Reading, Jesus then seems to go in a completely different direction using the illustration of the relationship between a master and slave. I wish he didn't say that either. First, the whole master/slave thing has always been **seen** as distasteful, but it was a real institution in his day so I guess I can **see** how he thought it would work. Second, the institution of slavery is not a thing that any of us can relate to. It has been banned in the United States since President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

The point of his illustration is that God is like a master and we are like his slaves. We don't get to do what we want. Without question, we are to do what God wants us to do. And furthermore he said that we shouldn't expect to be thanked for only doing what we are supposed to do.

Now, applying this illustration Jesus told, I should just stand up here in front of you and tell you that there is only one right response to the this annual stewardship campaign; Do the right thing! Amen and sit down. But if I concluded there, some of you would think I was rude and you might not come back again.

Furthermore, you all know that God loves us so much that he gave us free will to choose do the right thing because when we choose to do the right thing it is exercising our faith muscle. But we all know, each of us can define our own level of faithfulness with what we are *comfortable* with. I liken this to being the "lukewarm" disciples that Jesus said he wanted to spit out of his mouth.

Revelation 3:15 I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. **16**So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

So, even though it seems as though Jesus was harsh and direct when he responded to the disciple's ask, "Increase our faith." I still think it is a good request. Faith is indeed a thing that God can increase. But I also think Jesus is right in his response. God has already given us all the faith we need, and as I said earlier, faith is like a muscle, the more we use it the stronger it will become – but that can only be demonstrated if we do, in fact, use it.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So at this particular time, the first weekend of the "20/20 **Vision**" Annual Stewardship Campaign, I want to do as Jesus did and challenge you to exercise your faith.

Use your *time* to serve God doing the things that matter to God. Don't know what they are? Visit the Welcome Center, read the Monthly or Weekly newsletters and see the many opportunities to serve because that is about all we do. Speak to me or

any member of Council and tell us that you have some time that you would like to use serving God and God's church and we will **see** to it that you are put to work.

Use your *talent* to serve God doing the things that matter to God. God has given each of us talents. You adults probably know what they are. But if you don't know what your talents are, or you are a younger member or someone new to the fellowship of the faithful who has not had the opportunity to mine your talents, then speak to me or any member of Council and we will give you some ministry opportunities to try and **see** if it feels right to you.

Use your *treasure* to serve God and God's church so that as a fellowship of the faithful we can continue to do what we do; serve, teach evangelize, etc. It is simply a fact of life in this day and place that this ministry takes a lot of money to keep going. This church has thrived for over two-hundred years, and it has always relied on the faithfulness of its members. It's your church. If you want to **see** it thrive for another two-hundred years, fund it to keep it going.

Prayer

Lord we only have a little faith, no more than a mustard seed, but it is upon this much faith that we earnestly pray that you use us and our time, talents, and treasure, in whatever way you see fit, that you may be glorified in our stewardship. And if through our stewardship you increase our faith, then to you be the glory for that too. Be at work in our hearts, that when the time comes to make our commitments of support, that your will for us will be done. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen

By the way, if you were counting, there were 22 vision-related words.