

Lessons for the Sunday Gospels

BY AMY EKEH

OCTOBER 2

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 17:5-10

REFLECT: Many of the Gospel readings this month (from Luke 17-19) emphasize the life-changing phenomenon of true faith. Indeed, today's Gospel reading begins with the apostles making a direct request to Jesus: "Increase our faith."

The apostles' simple request tells us several things. First, they know the value of faith. Second, they recognize that they do not have enough of it. Jesus' response signals his own awareness that the faith of even his closest followers is lacking. His use of the conditional words "if" and "would" indicate that the full faith of the apostles has not yet been achieved: "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you

would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

We may be surprised by Jesus' words. Do the apostles, who have given up everything to follow Jesus, not even have faith the size of something as miniscule as a mustard seed? And can faith so small do something as powerful as uproot a tree? But we are also comforted by Jesus' words as we realize we are not alone in our own need for more faith. Even Jesus' closest companions had to ask for this gift! And we are further assured that, even when our faith is small, its potential is remarkably powerful.

Jesus then offers an illustration of how faith has the potential to change our perspective: A servant coming in from the fields would not expect special treatment from his master. He would expect to continue working, to do his job.

From a tiny beginning comes great power; from weakness comes strength; from humility comes greatness.

It is the same for those with faith, those who are servants of God. No special treatment, no glory or thanks are expected. From their faith-filled perspective, they are simply humble servants, doing as they are asked.

Jesus' initial words about the mustard seed are an example of

» MONTH SUMMARY «

OCT. 2

Luke 17:5-10

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus teaches about the power of faith the size of a mustard seed.

OCT. 9

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 17:11-19

A Samaritan leper is healed by Jesus and responds with faith and gratitude.

OCT. 16

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:1-8

Jesus teaches about the importance of persisting in prayer with the Parable of the Unjust Judge.

OCT. 23

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus teaches about the danger of self-righteousness with the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

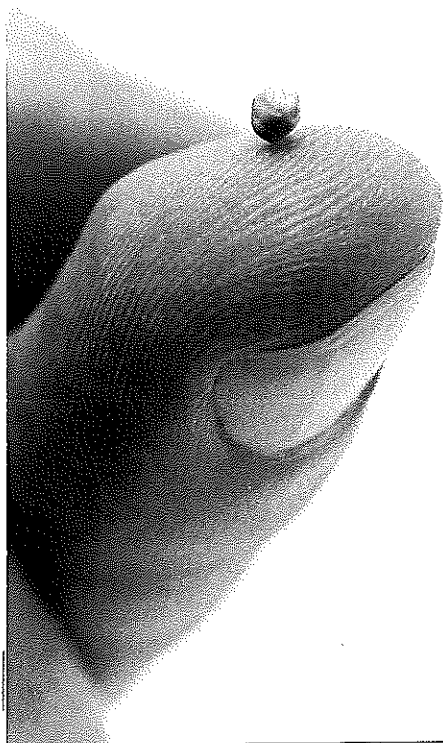
OCT. 30

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 19:1-10

Salvation comes to the house of Zacchaeus, a tax collector who is transformed by his encounter with Jesus.

Luke's well-known theme of the "great reversal" or the "reversal of fortunes": From a tiny beginning comes great power; from weakness comes strength; from humility



comes greatness. As the request of the apostles—"Increase our faith"—becomes our own prayer, we can expect great things in our lives, and we can expect that great things will be asked of us, his humble and faith-filled servants.

ASK YOURSELF: Is faith a "given" in my life, or is it a struggle? Do I ask Jesus to increase my faith?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Do you imagine that Jesus' closest disciples were holy and perfect, or do you think of them as regular human beings like you? What struggles do you think they had?

PRAY: Lord, increase my faith. I do not ask for greatness, only faith the size of a tiny seed. Plant that seed in me, and then ask of me whatever you wish.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: Pray each day this week that God will give you the gift of faith.

OCTOBER 9

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 17:11-19

REFLECT: This Sunday's Gospel reading begins with an important reminder that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Those who are reading the Gospel and following the Master on his journey will recall that Jesus has "set his face" (9:51) toward Jerusalem with great determination despite his full awareness that in Jerusalem he will face suffering and death (9:22).

We are then told that as Jesus enters a village along the way, ten lepers approach him. They are shouting out as lepers were obliged



to do (so that people could avoid them), but these lepers are shouting something unique. They are asking Jesus of Nazareth for mercy.

The fact that all ten lepers are healed is a testimony both to Jesus' power and the lepers' faith. But the story's real message emerges when one of the lepers, a Samaritan, returns to fall at the feet of Jesus and thank him. Once again, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan

Once again ... a Samaritan is the "hero" of the story. This is significant because Samaritans were looked down upon by mainstream Israelite society.

(Lk. 10:25-37), a Samaritan is the "hero" of the story. This is significant because Samaritans were looked down upon by mainstream Israelite society. They were not considered "true Israelites." They were not thought to be pleasing to God.

Yet here is a Samaritan, lying prostrate before the Lord. Here is a Samaritan of great faith. Here is a Samaritan—who Jesus pointedly calls "a foreigner" in order to drive home the point—who is the only one to return and give thanks.

This man is an unclean leper and a despised Samaritan, thoroughly rejected by society but resoundingly saved by Jesus: "Stand up and go; your faith has saved you." A great reversal indeed.

ASK YOURSELF: In my Eucharistic ("giving thanks") celebrations, do I remember to thank the Lord for hearing my own cries for mercy? Do I experience these celebrations as a time to fall at his feet and give thanks?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Why is it important to thank God for the good things in your life? How does it help you recognize that God is present in your life?

PRAY: Lord Jesus, I give you thanks for the mercy and healing you have brought into my life.



LIVE THE GOSPEL: Each day this week, thank God for something in your life. Keep a list of what you are thankful for and see how your blessings add up!

OCTOBER 16

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:1-8

REFLECT: In this Sunday's Gospel, Jesus tells a story infused with humor and a hard-hitting message – the Parable of the Unjust Judge.

Interestingly, Luke prefaces the parable with a brief explanation of its meaning. The parable, he tells us, is “about the necessity . . . to pray always without becoming weary.” This clear explanation is unusual! Usually when Jesus tells a parable, we (like the original hearers of the story) are left to wrestle with its purpose and meaning. This lack of explanation is a deliberate technique on the part of Jesus and the evangelists that prompts us to think critically and reflect deeply on the truths of the parables. This is how we usually digest and absorb their truths, how we “own” the parables and apply them to our lives.

The fact that Luke is upfront about the purpose of this parable

allows us to “sit back and enjoy” the parable. No “de-coding” or complicated interpretations are necessary; we can simply recognize its truth and let it settle into our lives.

The humor in the story is palpable. Jesus the master storyteller creates for us a memorable character who is totally selfish and lacking in scruples, a judge who “neither feared God nor respected any human being.” The judge is hounded by a widow in his town who is always coming to him and demanding that he rule in her favor. Her case is just, but that is not why he finally renders a just decision. He cares nothing for her case or her situation; he relents because she is so annoying! In fact, he is afraid the widow may one day show up and strike him! (The literal translation of his thought reads, “I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and hit me under the eye” or “give me a black eye.”)

Certainly God is not an unjust judge who has to be hammered

God wants us to keep asking. We should bring our needs before him with the tenacity of this persistent widow. We won't annoy God.

with verbal requests in order to finally act in our lives. The point of the story is the tenacity of the widow, and the lesson is simple: relentless asking gets results. The widow is stubborn, tireless, determined, resolute. What does this tenacity look like in our prayer

lives? Faith, steadfastness, devotion and confidence.

On a realistic note, we know that God does not always “rule in our favor,” at least not from our own limited perspectives. And yet Jesus teaches that God wants us to keep asking. We should bring our needs before him with the tenacity of this persistent widow. We won't annoy God. Rather, we will find ourselves repeatedly in his presence. We will give him every opportunity to rule our lives with justice. We will learn that he is always listening, and that he unfailingly responds to “his chosen ones who call out to him day and night.”

ASK YOURSELF: Do I really believe that God hears my prayers and cares about my petitions? Do I believe he will answer my prayers? Am I willing to ask again and again?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Have you ever prayed about something and felt like God didn't hear you? Did you keep praying about it, or did you give up?

PRAY: Lord Jesus, increase my faith so I may be persistent in prayer. I know you always hear me.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: Choose one petition (one thing to pray about), and pray it every day this week.

OCTOBER 23

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:9-14

REFLECT: If there was a human failing that Jesus could not tolerate, it was self-righteousness. He recognized it for the poison that it

is – a blinding, self-feeding toxin that invades the human psyche and totally cripples one’s ability to relate to God and others in a meaningful way. Self-righteousness is spiritually devastating because it prevents the human person from seeing reality. Rather than seeing one’s own shortcomings and needs, the self-righteous person sees a false perfection and experiences a dangerous sense of self-sufficiency.

When Jesus the Physician diagnosed self-righteousness, he had only one intention – to extract the poison and restore the person to health and wholeness. But the fatal irony of self-righteousness is obvious – the one who needs the doctor sees no need for treatment and therefore refuses it.

In this Sunday’s Gospel, Jesus illustrates how loathsome and destructive self-righteousness can be with the Parable of the Pharisee

and the Tax Collector – a brief but impactful story of two men praying in two very different ways.

The first man is a Pharisee, a publicly respected religious figure in Israel. The Pharisee, Jesus says, said a prayer *to himself*. Now this may simply mean that he is speaking quietly in his own mind. Or it may mean that his prayer *never made it outside of the walls of his own self-righteousness to find its way to God*. The Pharisee’s “prayer” extols his own greatness with words that should send a chill down the spine of every single one of us: “I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity.” What an awful thing to say! But which of us has not said those very words in our own hearts? On a regular basis? Yes, this parable is for us.

The second man is a tax collector, a publicly despised figure in

Israel. Israelite tax collectors had two things working against them – they were employed by the oppressive Roman Empire, and they were known to charge more than required and keep the extra for themselves. So they were colluding with the enemy and cheating their own people! But this tax collector – like the Samaritan leper in last week’s Gospel – is the “hero” of the story. He approaches prayer with humility, with eyes downcast out of deference, beating his breast as a sign of repentance, and praying the prayer we should all aspire to when our self-righteousness tries to win the day: “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

The tax collector, Jesus teaches, is right before God. He may not be perfect, but he has not poisoned himself with the paralyzing toxin of self-righteousness. He is asking for mercy, and he shall have it. The Pharisee, on the other hand, has exalted himself. It is a false exaltation based on a distorted reality. The Pharisee has left no room for growth, healing, mercy or salvation. But at some point the walls of his self-righteousness will crumble away, and he will be humbled.

ASK YOURSELF: Do I have a superior attitude, even buried deep in my own subconscious? How might it be affecting my prayer life and my relationships with others?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: One man in the parable is acting superior while the other is acting humble. Which attitude do you see more in the world around you? Which attitude do you prefer to see in your friends and family members? In yourself?



PRAY: Lord Jesus Christ, Physician of my soul, grant me humble eyes to see the truth about myself, and a humble heart to ask for your mercy.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: This week ask God to help you see the good in others rather than their faults.

OCTOBER 30

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 19:1-10

REFLECT: The last Sunday in October brings us to the beloved story of Zacchaeus, a “chief” tax collector who was determined to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he passed through the town of Jericho.

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a short man. He knew he would not be able to see Jesus over the crowds, so he climbed up a sycamore tree to get a better view. Zacchaeus’ act is a powerful testament not only to his curiosity but to his inner zeal. A curious man might push through the crowd a bit, or stand on tip-toe and crane his neck. But Zacchaeus – a grown man – climbed a tree. He was intent on seeing this Jesus of Nazareth.

The innate pull toward Jesus that Zacchaeus apparently felt intensifies as the story unfolds. Jesus approaches the sycamore tree. He looks up at Zacchaeus and asks to spend time with him. Zacchaeus scrambles down the tree, and Luke writes that he “received [Jesus] with joy.”

We don’t know what else Jesus said to Zacchaeus, or if words were even necessary. It seems that a glimpse of Jesus, hearing his name spoken by Jesus, and an invitation

to spend time with him were all that was necessary to bring about a complete change of heart in this man whose reputation as a tax collector would have been one of disloyalty and dishonesty. Deeply transformed by the encounter, Zacchaeus promised Jesus that he would give generously to the poor, and that he would restore anything he had extorted four times over (probably a reference to strict Jewish laws of restitution, e.g., Ex. 22:1). In response Jesus declared, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

It is clear that Jesus loved Zacchaeus, one whom the rest of Jewish society had written off as

It is clear that Jesus loved Zacchaeus, one whom the rest of Jewish society had written off as a sinner.

a sinner. How many closed hearts did Jesus pass in that town of

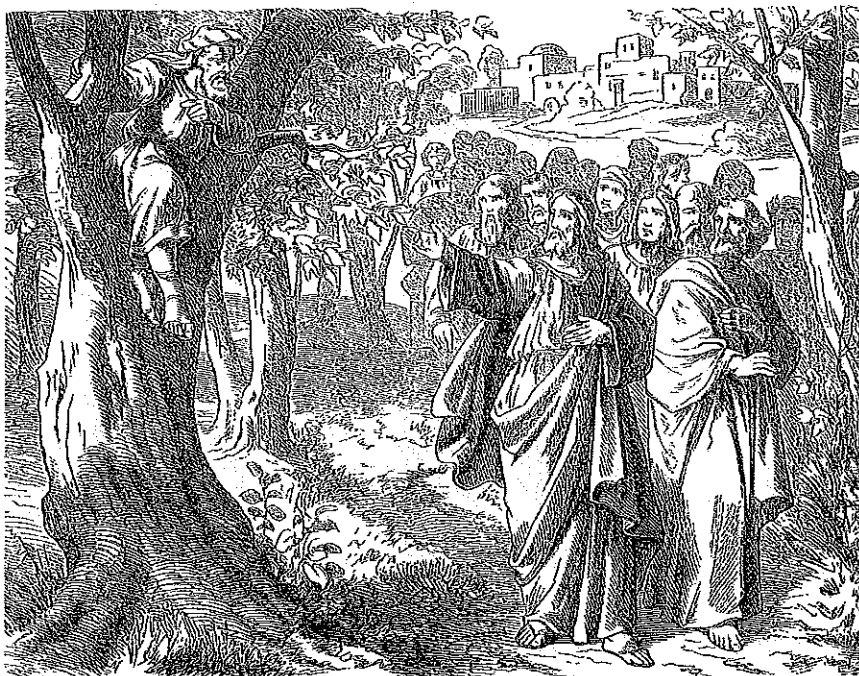
Jericho, until he came to that tree and looked up into the eyes and heart of Zacchaeus? This sinner was looking for salvation, and he knew it when he saw it.

ASK YOURSELF: How much do I want to see Jesus? What lengths will I go to in order to “get a glimpse” of him?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Why do you think Zacchaeus was curious about Jesus? What do you think he was looking for? Have you ever met anyone who made you want to change your life?

PRAY: Jesus, may I recognize you passing by. When you ask to spend time with me, may I hear your voice and receive you with joy. Help me to be open to salvation like Zacchaeus.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: If you have wronged anyone, do your best to make things right as a sign of how knowing Jesus has transformed you. Apologize and ask for the person’s forgiveness.



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