

Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
7.x.2007, 10:00 Holy Communion • ELW Setting 4
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-10; II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10
Saint James the Apostle Evangelical Lutheran Church / Brogue, Pennsylvania

J. J.!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come. ✠ Amen.

The Apostles said to the LORD, "Increase our faith!"

**The 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.**

--Luke 17:5,6

The candy shelves are spilling over these days in preparation for Halloween with more Hershey's Bars and M&Ms than one would think could be eaten by our entire population. Whenever I see M&Ms, I think of *Marek and Maria*, of two dear friends with whom I have been blessed for for over twenty years. One is an historian and the other a theologian. Both of them grew up in Poland in the

immediate aftermath of World War II. Both have known suffering and the memory of horror. Both of them are devoutly believing and practicing Christians. Both of them live in Germany, whose citizens, as they have become, are among the most well-off on the planet. Both of them work for an agency of the Catholic Church that provides educational and material assistance to parish priests and their congregations in some of the *poorest* parts of the world where faith is alive, more so perhaps than where they live, more so, perhaps, than where *we* live.

These two friends of mine, a husband and a wife, a father and a mother, have two sons. The elder son, whom I first met as a teenager, is now a psychiatrist in a large hospital. The younger son is an architect. Both brothers are artists, and have had their paintings shown together in several exhibitions. “How proud you must be of them,” I

once said to my friends of their sons. Their father, the historian, smiled. Yes, he *was* proud, but he knew what was coming from his better half. “Proud?!” their mother, the theologian, almost turned on me. “For the love of God, we are *not* proud of them! We *expect* them to give to God and their fellow man what is in them, that with which they have been blessed, and they have been blessed with very, very much! That is their duty! That is *our* duty! No?”

Yes. Truth sometimes stings in the ears. Truth stung in the ears of not just the Disciples, not the whole collective of followers of Jesus, but truth stung in the ears of the *Apostles*, of the specially chosen and specially *sent* ones out of whose lives and teaching and martyrdom the Church would be born and planted unto the ends of the earth in a single generation. The Apostles, who already

know they are special, want to be *more* special by having *more* faith, more faith than just your average Disciple.

Faith, both the faith that is taught and faith that is absolute trust in the forgiving and saving power of God, does not come in labeled sizes or quantities. Faith is the Holy Spirit of *God* that is present and active in a single life, in a single act of that single life, and in the community of lives and of faith that is the Church. Faith is neither small nor large because neither is God small or large. God is *almighty*, broader than the heavens and infinitely deeper than space, and also as focused and as fragile as a young girl's trust in an Angel's message, or as her Baby Boy.

Faith is that power, mightier than the atom, with which the Father has endowed us by His Spirit to make us equal in dignity to His only Son, so that *all* may sit at the table of His hospitality where He, the Lord and Host, serves

us, the very slaves who put His Son to death. Faith is that for which we are *responsible*, the living out of which is our *duty*, nothing more, nothing less. Faith is always a miracle of the first magnitude when it breaks through in our world, when it is acted out in our practice.

Imagine that you are a young person, and most of us *will* have to imagine, and that you have many young friends, and that, among these friends there is only the thought of doing what they wish to do, when they wish to do it and with whom, regardless of the consequences to anyone, regardless of the future, and very definitely regardless of God on Whom no one wastes even a single thought. Imagine that you are called to honor God with your behavior and with your body, the body that has been sanctified by the Body and Blood of Christ. Imagine *faith* in that context, and how difficult it may be, but that exactly

that is required of you in that hour. Is it fair that faith seems easier for your grandmother than for you? That is *not* the question. This is *your* hour to believe.

Imagine, if you *have* to imagine, someone who has sinned grievously by willfully and repeatedly slandering a brother or sister Christian, or, for that matter, *any* human being created in the image of God. Then imagine also one who, as a rule, never speaks ill of anyone, one who, however, also cannot find the courage, the *faith* that God will uphold him or her when it becomes necessary to speak up for another, to defend another's name and who, in fact, sins by omission in this way while the first sinner mentioned spins out ever more destructive yarns.

Imagine that the two sinners repent, that is, that they actually go to the person against whom they have sinned, and that they come sincerely before God, and that they each

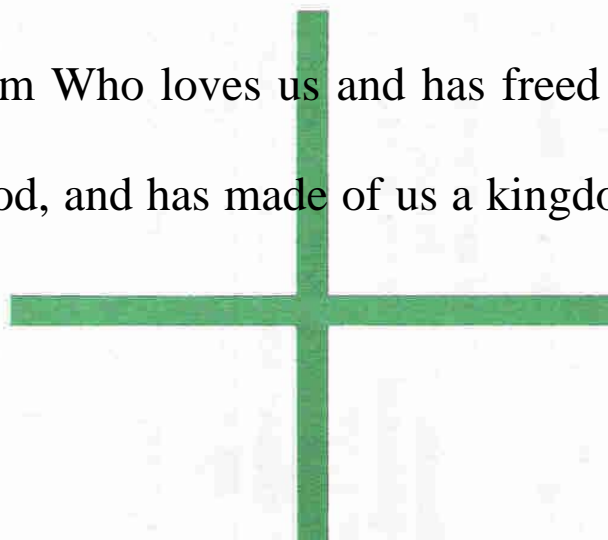
ask to be forgiven. It is by the same faith that the victim of slander would forgive each, though in the case of the habitual gossip, the victim might have to overcome his or her own desire for revenge and retribution given the deliberateness, the repetition and the harm caused by the sin of false witness. In the other case, feelings of pity for the weakness of the brother or sister who lacks the strength to speak out might require a lesser act of the will on the part of the victim, but it still requires faith to forgive and to trust that all will be made well in Christ.

Or imagine, as I *hope* you will always have to, that you and those you love have lost *everything*, your home, your community, your future. Imagine that you are an Iraqi, whether Muslim or Christian, afraid of the soldiers sent to free and protect you, afraid of your own soldiers, afraid of foreigners and kinsmen alike, or imagine that you

are one of those being hounded and starved to death, whether Christian or native animist, in the Darfur region of Sudan, or that your cancer has returned and that now everyone admits openly that there is no treatment, only death ahead. What does God require of you today? *Only* faith, *only* the opening of the soul toward Heaven on this, perhaps your last day in this valley of tears.

What does God required of you and me today? It may not be something as hard as I have described, but it is still faith, and all faith is of God and is of the power that created and sustains all things. May our lives produce such miracles of power today and always. ✠Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His



God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the
Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever! ✠ Amen.

S. D. G. !