

Scripture:
Luke 17:1-10

“That’s life.”

At first glance Luke 17 appears a bit like a random collection of unrelated sayings of Jesus.

In The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible ---- the heading for Luke 17 is --- “Some sayings of Jesus.”

“Some sayings of Jesus.”

In the NIV --- the version we have in our pews --- the heading for Luke 17 verses 1 to 10 is --- “Sin, faith, duty.”

“Some sayings of Jesus” ---- and ---- “Sin, faith, duty.”

In other words --- what you are about to read are things Jesus said about various things that have been thrown together.

It’s as if --- at least at first glance ----- it’s as if the redactors --- the revisers and editors of Luke’s gospel ---- had a few unused phrases of Christ and so they strung them together in this later section of Luke’s gospel.

Listen again to Luke 17 verses 1 to 10 ---- it’s almost disjointed --- or pieced together after the fact --- it could have easily been broken down into 3 distinct sections and divided by 3 separate headings.

1Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. **2**It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. **3**So watch yourselves.

“If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. **4**Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying ‘I repent,’ you must forgive them.”

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

6He replied, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.

7“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? 8Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? 9Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? 10So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

And so we have --- Sin ---- verse 1 to 5 ---- section or saying 1.

Faith --- verses 5 and 6 --- section or saying 2.

And duty ----- verse 7 to 10 --- section or saying 3.

You can see these verses as kinds of bits and pieces left on the cutting floor -
----- good enough to hear --- but not really fitting anywhere else --- not elaborated on or filled out individually.

But there’s also more cohesion to these verses than first meets the eye.

Verses 1 to 4 basically say that life will always include things that cause us to stumble ---- and there will always be unfavourable people who enable these things to happen.

People who seem intent on tripping us up spiritually ----- people who somehow find ways to make things a little more problematic than they need to be.

And not only this but Jesus suggests that sometimes what we’d really like to see done with these kinds of problematic and destructive people is more like something we’d see in a movie like the Godfather.

Are people familiar with the Godfather and how problematic people --- people who hinder and get in the way ----- are basically dealt with in the Godfather movie ----- they’re killed off.

Maybe like in Godfather movie --- we’d like to see people who cause us struggles and hinder us spiritually thrown into the local lake with a cinder block tied around their neck.

Jesus puts it this way ----- “It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck...”

A millstone --- the giant stone wheel used to grind wheat.

Anyone thrown into the sea with that tied around their neck would certainly quickly drown.

It’s as if Jesus says life includes unsavoury people --- people who harm and hinder ---- people who are spiritually corrupt and draining ---- life unfortunately always includes these people ---- and though it might seemed like a good idea if these people could be done away with --- in truth that isn’t the solution ----- challenging people are with us and they always will be.

We can’t just deal with them Godfather style ----- with cement swimming boots ----- or cinderblock necklaces.

Spiritually corrupt people ----- spiritually draining people ----- bad people --
- evil people ---- aren’t about to go away.

So watch yourselves Jesus says.

“Watch yourselves” ----- as in watch out for them --- and “Watch yourselves” ----- as in don’t become one of these people --- corrupt ---- or spiritually destructive or draining.

Just as Jesus says that we will always have the poor among us ---- in Matthew ---- Mark and John’s gospel ----- it’s as if He says here ---- you will always have the disruptive ones among you too.

And not only will we always have them --- but they will in fact be near to us --- within our community of believers even.

In verse 3 Jesus says --- “If your brother or sister sins against you...”

And brother or sister here --- means fellow disciple or believer --- brother or sister in Christ.

So if a fellow disciple --- a fellow believer sins against us ---- we are to forgive them --- and we are to forgive them time after time after time after time.

Verse 4 from Luke's gospel today says ----- "Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

In other words don't think that just because they messed up once they won't do it again.

People will mess up over and over again ---- complicating things over and over again ---- that's life.

Yes it would be nice if this wasn't the case ---- but unfortunately it always will be --- that's just life ----- people sometimes complicate things ---- sin is real.

People close to us ----- brothers and sisters --- fellow believers --- will continue to make things a little messy from time to time --- that's life ---- and we have to learn to deal with it --- we have to learn to forgive.

In fact it's very likely that those who trip us up --- those who bother us --- those who annoy us --- will continue to do so for a very long time --- and not only will we have to learn how to forgive but we will have to learn how to forgive ----- over ----- and over ---- and over again.

"Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

9 times out of 10 ----- we know the names of the people who cause us the greatest heartache.

9 times out of 10 they are brothers and sisters --- fellow believers or family members or both ---- that cause us the greatest heart ache.

And 9 times out of 10 ----- they do it again and again and again.

And that's life.

And Jesus knew this and so He talked about it.

The probability that we will be hurt and hurt repeatedly by one another in our own little circle is very very high --- Jesus knew this and so He reminds us of this ---- that's life right --- it's messy ----- and people hurt us and make mistakes --- and people even corrupt God's plans ----- even good people corrupt God's plans sometimes --- clueless as they often are about it they actively do it.

And so Jesus tells us that we have to forgive them --- because that's also life.

Learning to forgive --- and learning to forgive over and over again --- seven times in the very same day perhaps even --- is part of life ---- at least part of the life for a Christian.

I have to say looking at these verses it's hard at first to see how they are linked together.

But I see clearly now that they are.

So in verse 5 ---- what could be seen as the beginning of a new saying of Christ --- separate from verses 1 to 4.

In verse 5 the disciples come to Jesus asking for more faith.

Jesus has just finished telling them that yes there will be troubling people --- -- people who may cause us to stumble spiritually --- and even though we'd really like to throw them into the river in cement boots ----- we have to forgive them --- because they are a part of life --- and forgiving is a part of life.

On being given the counsel from Christ that they are to forgive people over and over and over again.

People close to them ---- people who will commit the same sin ---- the same annoying behaviours --- the same destructive behaviours --- day after day after day.

After being told that they are to forgive these people the disciples reply with something like ----- “O.K. Lord ----- but you have to help us out here ----- give us more faith.”

In other words --- if you want us to do all this great forgiving ----- seven times a day to the same people committing the same things over and over again ---- hurting us --- causing us to stumble in our faith ---- then we’re going to need some help ----- we’re going to need far more faith.

And this is how Jesus replies ---- “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed ---- you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”

When confronted with difficult people Jesus basically says to His disciples --

“That’s life.

Life is full of difficult people they aren’t about to go away --- and you have to learn to forgive them.

You have to learn how to talk with them about it and you have to learn to forgive them --- and you have to learn how to do this repeatedly --- with the same people and over the same things ---- over and over again.”

And then when asked to provide the disciples with more faith to deal with these difficult people --- Jesus invites His disciples to reconsider what exactly faith is and how it works.

More often than not when the Bible talks about faith --- it is considered a gift from God.

Faith is a gift from God --- something we are blessed with more than it is something we self generate.

But here Jesus seems to be talking about faith in different terms.

“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed ---- you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” --- ---- paints a little bit different picture of faith than it just being a gift given.

It's as is the disciple's want a bit of the easy way out.

“If you want us to forgive endlessly Lord --- then give us the faith to do so --
- because left to our own devices we just might resort to the millstone
around the neck and then throw into the river scenario you described to us in
verse 2.”

Rather than simply saying to the disciples --- “Well yes then I will give you
more faith and you will find the power and patience to forgive the same
people over and over again.”

Rather than giving them this easier way out --- Jesus says ---- “If you have
faith as small as a mustard seed ---- you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be
uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.”

Here faith is pictured less as a gift from beyond and more a disposition.

Here faith is openness to God's power.

Faith here --- is openness to God's power.

If they are open to God's power --- specifically God's power to forgive ---
then they can deal with the frustrations ---- hurts --- and disappointments in
life.

They can move mountains and they can move mulberry trees.

So --- we've got verses 1 to 4 ---- that's life ----- there always will be
difficult people --- people whose behaviour will sometimes hinder our
spiritual development and journey ----- and very often these people will be
close to us and very often these people will change little and they will
continue to make our lives difficult --- and cause us to stumble.

That's just life.

And as Christians we are to be open to God's power to forgive ---- and we
are to carry on forgiving and loving in God's name --- and not resorting to
retaliation or revenge ---- putting a millstone around their necks and
throwing them into the river.

And so now we come to the last few verses ---- 7 to 10.

7“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? **8**Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? **9**Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? **10**So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

What do these verses mean ----- and what do they have to do with the first 6 verses? --- if anything.

The simple answer is this.

Verses 1 to 4 have to do with difficult spiritually disruptive people --- and how they will always be with us.

Verses 5 and 6 have to do with how we are to confront and by forgive these people.

And then verse 7 to 10 ----- remind us that when we do as Jesus instructs us to do ----- forgive and fulfill or calling in Christ by forgiving as we are forgiven ---- it’s not as though we are to be lifted up as some kind of a great example of holy and pious behaviour.

Rather when we do as God calls us to do --- forgiving and loving others ---- we simply carry on quietly ---- because that too is life.

The servant isn’t lauded for being a servant in verses 7 to 10 ---- instead this is what Jesus says after the servant has ----- well ---- been a servant ----- done what he or she was created to do -----

“So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

In other words after having done the right things we’re not to look for a medal for good behaviour ---- we’ve only done what we were supposed to do in the first place.

These verses were no doubt a harsh wake up call.

And not just the last verse ---- verse 10 with its rather cold ---- “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

But all these 10 verses in general.

I can see why these verses were kind of thrown together into a section of ---- -- “Sayings of Jesus” ----- or into a section called ----- “Sin ---- faith and duty” ---- and at the same time I can also see why they were also put together if they weren’t also actually said together by Jesus.

These verses find Jesus talking frankly with His disciples about the challenges and sometimes frustrations and disappointments of life ----- people who drag us down --- people who cut us down ----- people who chip away at --- and erode our relationship with God.

And Jesus basically says yes they are around ----- and He basically says and by the way they aren’t going anywhere either --- they will always be around.

And yes you will have to learn to interact faithfully with them ---- calling them on it and then forgiving them --- and you will have to do this over and over and over again --- that’s life people are messy and situations are messy and even after we clean them up and forgive they can get messy again.

And Jesus also says ----- after you do --- after you forgive ---- as difficult as it can be to forgive over and over again ----- don’t think too highly of yourselves because in truth you’re simply doing what you’re supposed to do nothing great or special or stupendous ----- just the obvious ---- and faithful - ---- and Christian thing to do.

Pretty tough verses --- pretty helpful and true and life giving verses as well.

I can well imagine Jesus’ disciples finding His responses refreshing and life giving.

It's as though Jesus came along side them when dealing with challenging people and circumstances and said --- "I know." ----- "Right."

"I too have to deal with difficult people ----- I too have to forgive them --- I too have to continue to live with them day after day after day --- as they continue to mess things up --- hurt me --- hurt others --- and hurt themselves."

And the solution is --- remaining open to God's power to change things.

Remaining open to the truth that ---- "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed ---- you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."

That's just life.

God can do amazing --- seemingly impossible things if we get out of the way of ourselves and let Him live in and through us.

Difficult people.

Annoying people.

People who cut us off at the knees ----- pull the fabric of our faith apart ---- or at least try to.

They will always be around.

But also around --- alive ----- at work in the world ----- is the power of love and forgiveness --- the power and mercy of Gods' grace.

And the mercy of God's grace is abundant.

It is present and alive and working in the world every single time we simply do as God wishes us to do --- forgive someone ---- love someone ----- do whatever it is that God desires of us instead of only ever being driven by our own passions --- wants --- and needs.

We have done precisely what were created to do every time we do as God would have us to.

It's not so much that we have done something amazing and deserve a reward ----- we already have the reward if you like --- forgiveness --- salvation --- God's love --- God's eternal love ---- and so knowing this and experiencing these things we ought to be driven to goodness and love.

One time Jesus overturned some tables and drove some people out of the temple courts.

One time Jesus fed thousands of hungry people gathered on a hillside.

One time Jesus met with the devil and put him in his place.

One time Jesus entered into a room filled with His disciples through the walls and breathed the Holy Spirit into them.

One time Jesus calmed a storm and walked on water.

One time Jesus turned water into wine.

One time Jesus raised a man from the dead.

One time Jesus raised Himself from the dead.

Jesus did some pretty amazing and even some miraculous ---- seemingly impossible things.

And ----- one time Jesus sat with His disciples and told them how they are to live with difficult people who aren't about to go away.

One time Jesus sat with His friends and said ----- "That's life ----- people can be annoying and difficult and harmful ---- and this is how you are to live with them ----- by forgiving them --- forgiving and loving them is what you're called by God to do."

In the midst of life --- is Jesus Christ --- healing ---- reconciling --- redeeming ----- always present.

Yes there will be difficult people.

Yes there will be good people who do ugly things.

Yes sometimes some people whether they intend it or not ---- will do things that erode away at faith ---- and cut apart faithful acts ---- and tear down that which is good.

They will always be here in life ----- but that isn't the end of the story.

God's grace in Jesus Christ is ----- forgiveness is.

We are no better than the next person --- we shouldn't ever think of holding ourselves up as any kind of great and worthy example.

We're all messed up in different ways ----- and always will be.

Thankfully God knows this --- and God still loves us and always will.

And He wants us to do exactly the same with everyone else.

Love them --- forgive them --- not hold them accountable for their mistakes - ---- and get on with life.

Praise be to God for newness of life in Jesus Christ.

If we have faith the size of a mustard seed ----- if we are open --- just this much ----- the size of a mustard seed to God's power ----- than anything is possible.

Amen.