

The Twenty-seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Habakkuk 1:2-3; 2:2-4
<i>Response</i>	If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 1:6-8, 13-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[B]ut the word of the Lord abides forever. That word is the good news which was preached to you.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 17:5-10

The 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues our journey through the Gospel of Luke with more of Jesus' parables from Luke. And in this case, we have two more brief parables: the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Mulberry Tree (or the Sycamore Tree...you'll sometimes see it translated either way) and the Parable of the Dutiful Servants. So let's walk through these together. It's not very long; we'll try to unpack their meaning for today. In Luke 17:5-10 we read these words:

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

"Will any one of you, who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down at table'? Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink'? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'"¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Alright, finally we get a short Gospel. After all these weeks of very long passages from the Gospel of Luke, here are two just very brief parables—but very important parables as well. So let's walk through each of them together.

Notice the first one, the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Mulberry Tree. The context for this parable is interesting. And this is something distinctive of Luke, he tells us that the setting of the parable was when the apostles turned to Jesus and said, "Increase our faith!" Two things to notice about that....First, Luke is—Luke's Gospel in particular—likes to refer to the Twelve as the apostles. It's not exclusive to him, but that's one of his ways of referring to them. Luke is also distinctive in that he likes to refer to Jesus as "the Lord" and not just by his name Jesus. So those are both kind of distinctively Lukan elements for this distinctive verse here, which is only in Luke, just to give you an example of how to be attune to Luke's own contribution to the Gospel tradition.

So when he said the apostles said, "Lord, increase our faith!"—the Greek word for faith there is *pistis*. It's the same word used by St. Paul. It has a connotation of meaning—a range of meanings—it's a little broader than just the English word "faith." So when we tend to use the word faith, we mean belief, and like intellectual assent to a particular proposition. And that's very true, the word faith means that, but it can also mean trust—like is someone faithful, or can you put your faith in them—usually connotes in English, can you trust them? So it's a little more than just believing someone; it's also the act of entrusting yourself to them and trusting their word. And so here, when Jesus is responding to the disciples' plea, when the disciples say, "Increase our faith!"...They're praying there for trust, their belief, in God and in His power and His might to be increased. So notice, it assumes they already have faith but that their faith can grow. That's also very important, right? Faith is something that we can possess, but it's an organic thing. It's a living thing. And just like living bodies can grow from being children to adolescents to being adults, so too our faith—like a seed in the parable of the sower—is something planted but it also can grow. So here, the apostles are saying, "Lord, grow our faith. Help us to increase in our belief and in our trust." And so in response to that request, Jesus gives the apostles a parable:

“If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, ‘Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Okay, so, first thing here. Notice here that Jesus is using two images from the natural world to give this parable. The first image is that of a mustard seed, and the second is that of a sycamine tree—or a sycamore tree, or a mulberry tree, it’s translated in different ways. So let’s look at each of those in turn. The first image is that of a mustard seed. In the Greek, it’s *synapi*. Proverbially, it was seen as the smallest of seeds. Now sometimes, modern readers get bent out of shape, because they’ll say, “Well actually, in point of fact, the mustard seed isn’t the smallest seed in all of creation.” Well, yeah, that’s true, but in Jewish proverbs or Jewish speech, it was just a kind of axiomatic thing to use as an image of something very, very, very small. That was the mustard seed. So it’s an image of their faith being very, very small, and yet very, very powerful.

And then the second element he uses here from the natural world, he says is: “If your faith were even the size of a mustard seed, you could say to the sycamine tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.” Okay, now there are two aspects of that that are worth highlighting here. First, the Greek word for sycamine or mulberry tree is *sykaminos*. Some scholars have pointed out that the words here sound similar to one another in Greek. The mustard seeds, *synapi*...the sycamine tree, *sykaminos*...that maybe there’s an attempt at a kind of word play here that otherwise explains the strange juxtaposition of these two terms, the mustard seed and sycamine tree. In any case, we’re not sure exactly what kind of tree Jesus is referring to here. Many translations will say it’s a mulberry tree, in particular a black mulberry. Others will translate this as a sycamore tree, and you can hear the Greek word *sykaminos*...sounds like the root of our English word sycamore tree. And we’re actually going to see a sycamore tree in Luke 19:4 with the famous story of Zaccheus, who climbs up into the sycamore tree.

In any case, when Jesus says, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this sycamore tree, be uprooted,” he appears to be drawing on the ancient Jewish understanding of sycamore trees—or mustard trees, it’s true of either one—being a small tree with a very wide and deep root system. We actually know that this was the case from the Mishnah. The Mishnah is a collection of ancient Jewish

traditions, and in one of the books of the Mishnah, it gives a law about where you can plant a sycamore tree. Listen to this. In Mishnah, tractate *Baba Bathra* 2:11, it says:

A tree may not be grown within twenty-five cubits of a cistern, or within fifty cubits if it is a carob or a sycamore-tree...²

So in other words, as you're laying out a town, if there's a cistern or a well, you shouldn't plant a tree twenty-five feet from the well, because the roots will penetrate the well and damage the well. But if it's a sycamore tree, you shouldn't plant it, you need to push it even further. It needs to be at least fifty cubits, and a cubit is about a foot and a half—it's about the size, the length from your elbow to your fingertips, about a foot and a half. It needs to be at least fifty cubits from the well, because that's how far the root system of the sycamore tree will go.

Now, if you've ever tried to pull up a weed, like in your garden, that has a root system that goes out six feet—much less sixty feet—you know how difficult it is to pull a plant out of the ground...even a small plant, if it has a widespread root system. It's basically impossible, in other words, to yank up a sycamore tree by the stump—or by the trunk—because the root system is so extensive. So Jesus is presuming his audience is familiar with that reality of what a sycamine tree is like, so he's saying “even if your faith was as small as a mustard seed, you could say to the sycamine tree”—first point of impossibility—“be uprooted,” and it would. And the second point is “be planted in the sea, and it would obey you.” Now this is a great example of the parabolic twist, right? Jesus always has some element of his parables—or not always, but often—has some element of the parable that's unexpected or it's surprising. It's not what you would think, and it doesn't actually match life in the natural world. And as a rule, this would qualify. Nobody plants their sycamore trees in the ocean, right? You don't plant trees in the ocean. They can't grow there. And yet, what Jesus is saying is, even if your faith was as small as a mustard seed, you can take this sycamine tree, not only uproot it, but you could plant it in the ocean, and it would obey you.

² Mishnah, *Baba Bathra* 2:11; trans. H. Danby

Okay, now he's got their attention, right? What is he trying to show them in this parable? He's trying to show them that faith can do what is completely impossible. It's completely impossible to speak to a sycamine tree, have it be uprooted, and be planted in the sea—just by the power of the word. And yet, Jesus is saying, if their faith was even as small as a mustard seed, they could do that. So the point is that faith can do supernatural things. Faith can do things that are technically impossible, but it accomplishes these things through the power of God. And that's the basic point of the parable—a very short parable but very powerful parable.

The next parable has to do with what I call “the dutiful servants.” Now it's not clear why this parable is next to the parable of the mustard seed. Sometimes Luke connects the parables thematically; sometimes they're just juxtaposed. In this case, it's not exactly clear, but the meaning of the parable is actually pretty clear. So basically, in this case, Jesus formulates the parable in the form of a question, so He basically says, “Would any one of you if you had a slave, a servant, plowing the field or keeping the sheep, say to him when he's come in from work, you sit down at the table, come and rest. Would he rather not say to him you get supper ready for me, serve me, til I eat and drink, and then afterward, you can eat and drink. Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded?”

So obviously, the answer—the implied answer—to this question is no, of course not. The master does not thank the servant when the servant has done his duty. The master does not give the servant a place at his table to eat for he himself hasn't even eaten at the end of the day. And so, if you're wondering, well wait, what's the point of this question? You have to look at the end of the parable. And as I've expressed in other videos, Jesus will frequently put the *nimshal*—the Hebrew word, the explanation or the point of the parable—at the end, and it gives you the explanation or the meaning of the rest of the story. And here He says the comparison, “so”, meaning “so, also you—when you have done all that was commanded you—should say, we are unworthy servants. We've only done what is our duty.”

Alright, so this is an interesting parable for a couple of reasons. First, when Jesus talks about the master thanking the servant, the Greek word there for thanks is *charis*; it's the same word that Paul uses for grace, or a gift. So the point kind of is

this: when the servant has done his duty, does the master give him a gift just for doing what was commanded of him or what was expected of him? And the implied answer is no. And the analogy there is that basically what Jesus is saying to the disciples is that “you are all servants, and God is your master, so when you keep his commandments, there shouldn’t be some kind of expectation of gifts or rewards, because all you’re doing is your duty.” And interestingly here, the Greek word for duty is *opheilō*, which literally means your “debt”. It’s the same word that gets used in the Lord’s prayer, when Jesus says, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”—it’s the same word there. And so what Jesus is describing here is a situation in which the servant is indebted to the master, and when the servant does what he’s commanded, he’s simply fulfilling his duty or paying his debt.

Now, what’s Jesus trying to get at in this parable? A couple things. First, I think the parable is meant to guard the disciples against spiritual pride, or any kind of pride for that matter. Imagine, you can imagine a situation where the disciples—by this point in the Gospels, in particular—have been among the chosen Twelve.

Remember, it’s the apostles who asked the initial question. They’ve been selected by Jesus from the crowds. They’ve begun practicing ministry with him. In Luke 10 He sends them out on their apostolic mission. They’re given the power to cast out demons. They’re given the power to preach the kingdom of God. They’re performing miracles in His name. They say, “Even the demons are subject to us!” And you can imagine how there might be a temptation there to see themselves as elect, to see themselves as chosen, and to give way to spiritual pride. I mean, look at all that I’m doing for the kingdom of God! I’ve given up my home, I’ve given up my fishing business. I’ve left my town and my family behind. I’m traveling with Jesus. I’m preaching the Gospel. I’m casting out demons.

And what does Jesus say? Don’t give in to pride. He’s using this parable to teach them the virtue of humility, to remember that in the grand scheme of things, the Lord is still their master and they are literally...the Greek word he uses here is “worthless slaves.” The RSV has “unworthy servants,” and that’s a fine translation too, but the Greek is a little stronger. *Achreioi douloi* means “worthless slaves.” So he’s telling the disciples, you need to remember that, in comparison with God, you

are a worthless slave, and for you to obey the commands of your master is simply you paying the debt, you simply fulfilling your duty.

Now you might think, wow, that's a little harsh. Well, it's Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. A lot of His sayings are harsh, and sometimes they're harsh because they're meant to get our attention. They're meant to grab our attention and help us to remember things. Because let's face it, it's easy sometimes to forget how radically indebted we really are to God. Especially if you work in the Church, maybe you work in ministry. I don't know...maybe you teach catechism, maybe you're a priest or a deacon, maybe you're a religious sister, maybe you're just a mom or dad, and you put in a good day's work every day, and you're trying to serve your family and trying to serve your community. It's easy to think, hey, you know, I've paid all my debts, I've done my duty, right? I deserve a little reward here.

And there can be some truth to that, and we'll see other sayings where Jesus talks about how those who practice almsgiving and prayer will be rewarded in the kingdom to come. But it's also crucial throughout all of that to maintain the virtue of humility and to remember that yes, while you have been chosen to be a disciple of Jesus, at the same time, you're also a sinner. And every time we sin, we sin ultimately—as the psalm says—against you, O Lord, have I sinned, and you alone. So we incur a debt. There's the debt of our sin that we incur every time we break one of the Ten Commandments or even just engage in sins that are unseen—venial sins, things that we're unaware of, faults that we practice. And so we're always in debt to God; we're never going to pay off that debt. And remembering that reality is very helpful for living the life of humility that Jesus is calling His disciples to.

So perhaps that might be the answer to the pairing of these two parables. One teaches the virtue of faith; the other teaches the virtue of humility. And those two things really do go together, because it takes humility to put trust in God and to trust that no matter what happens in this life, no matter what happens in this world, at the end of the day, God is the one who is in command. God can do impossible things with the tiniest gift of faith if we trust Him. So I think that's what Jesus is trying to call the apostles to here in the Gospel for today, to humility and to faith in God.

And I must say, just by way of application to our own day and time, I find this parable here—although it is a little harsh in its language—I find it very helpful, because, in particular, growing up in contemporary, western, American context, there’s a huge emphasis in our culture on personal rights. Lots of emphasis on “This is my right,” “What’s your right?”, “What are our civil rights?”, “What are our personal rights?” But sometimes all of that emphasis on rights can eclipse a balanced emphasis on responsibilities. The very language of “duty” has a kind of negative connotation to it these days. You don’t hear a lot of people talking about doing our duty, carrying out our duties, being faithful to the duty of our state in life, whatever that may be, as one of the prime responsibilities of obedience to God...is fidelity to the duty of your state in life, doing what’s obligated of you. There’s not a lot of emphasis on that.

And in this parable in particular, the parable of the unworthy servant, Jesus is reminding the disciples that part of the Christian life, part of the life of discipleship, is fulfilling your duties and not expecting praise and gifts and reward simply for carrying out what was...what you were under obligation to do.

So if you’re a mother or a father and you take care of your children, that’s great, but that’s also your duty. If you’re an employee and you do your job well, that’s great! But that’s your duty. If you’re a Christian and you keep the commandments, great job, but that’s also just your duty. That’s part of who you are; it’s the duty of being a disciple of Jesus.

Alright, with that in mind, let’s go back to the Old Testament for today. If you look at the Old Testament reading, it’s from the tiny little book of Habakkuk (huh-BAK-uhk), or Habakkuk (hab-e-kük), you hear it pronounced either way. It’s in chapter 1:2-3 and 2:2-4, so it’s splicing together two different passages, but I’ll read them here together. It says this:

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and thou wilt not hear?
Or cry to thee “Violence!”
and thou wilt not save?
Why dost thou make me see wrongs

and look upon trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

And then it skips down to chapter 2:2-4, and it says this:

And the Lord answered me:
“Write the vision;
make it plain upon tablets,
so he may run who reads it.
For still the vision awaits its time;
it hastens to the end—it will not lie.
If it seem slow, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.
Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail,
but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Okay, very famous passage from the prophet Habakkuk. That verse 4 there, “the righteous shall live by his faith”—or some translations have “the righteous person shall live by faith”—is one of the lines that’s quoted by St. Paul in his favorite teaching of justification by faith, apart from works of the law. So when Paul is arguing that you don’t have to be circumcised and keep many of the laws of the Torah in order to be saved, he actually quotes this passage from Habakkuk about the righteous person living by faith. In any case, for today’s reading, the reason this passage is chosen is because it’s really about unanswered prayer. So if you look at the first part of that quotation, what does it say? How long O Lord am I going to cry for your help, and you’re not going to answer me? How long am I going to cry out violence in the world, injustice in the world, bloodshed in the world, and you won’t save people? Why don’t you deliver the people in the world today who are suffering? There’s so much violence, there’s so much bloodshed. That’s what Habakkuk’s saying in his own time.

Now think about in our own day too; the same principle applies. This is the so-called problem of evil, looking around in the world, seeing that there’s so much evil in the world. At the same time, recognizing well, wait, if the God—the one,

true God—is omnipotent, if He’s all powerful, why does He permit this evil to take place? Why does He permit it not just to happen, but apparently to flourish? Where is He? How long is it going to be before He brings salvation?

And then the second half of the passage actually is the Lord’s response when He says what? “If it seems slow, wait for it. It’s going to come. It will not delay.” In the present, the righteous person lives by faith. And the Hebrew word there for faith, *emunah*, has the same connotations as the Greek word *pistis*. It isn’t just belief, like assent to an intellectual proposition—“I believe this is true”—but it’s a living, active, act of trust. In other words, faith isn’t just an act of the intellect, it’s an act of the will. It’s choosing to trust God and to trust His providence, even when you look around you and it looks as if He’s absent, it looks as if He isn’t attending to the evils and the sufferings of this world, it looks as if He’s not going to come through. What does the prophet say? Wait for it. It will not delay. The righteous live by faith, by trust in what is unseen in the salvation of God.

So that’s a very powerful passage from Habakkuk. I would really encourage you to read over it and pray for it. I mean, if you haven’t gotten to the point in your spiritual life yet where you have to trust God because things look really bad and it looks like he’s absent, just wait for it. It’ll come soon enough. It’s part of the life of faith. It’s been that way since the Old Testament all the way through the New Testament period, all the way up to today. It’s always been the case that God’s chosen people see the sufferings around them and are called to live a life of *pistis*...a life of faith, a life of trust.

And that really is the theme of the psalm for today. One of the most famous psalms in the Old Testament is Psalm 95. It’s also one of the most well known psalms if you are a priest or a religious or if you pray the Liturgy of the Hours regularly. This is one of the daily psalms; it’s Psalm 95. So you know this one well. I want to focus just on the last few verses of the psalm. This is what it says:

O that today you would hearken to his voice!
Harden not your hearts, as at Mer’ibah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
when your fathers tested me,

and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, “They are a people who err in heart,
and they do not regard my ways.”
Therefore I swore in my anger
that they should not enter my rest.

Okay, why does the Church give us this verse today? Why does it give us this verse: “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts”? And where was Meribah and Massah anyway? This is one of those times that you’ve got to make sure you go back to the Old Testament passage and look at it carefully, otherwise you miss the context.

I don’t usually do this, but I’m actually going to read the Old Testament background. In Exodus 17, if you look at verses 1-7, it will give you the story of Meribah and Massah. And basically, the story is this: Exodus 17 comes right after Exodus 16—important—and in Exodus 16 you have the story of the miraculous manna from Heaven. It’s something I’ve talked about many times, where God provides miraculous bread from Heaven to feed his people. Well as soon as he’s done that in Exodus 17, the people have gotten their food but they start to complain about water. And so what Moses does is he strikes the rock at Meribah and the water flows forth miraculously and feeds—it doesn’t feed the people—and gives them water to drink. And at the very end of that passage in verse 7 it says this, after Moses performs the miracle it says:

[Moses] called the name of the place Massah and Mer’ibah, because of the faultfinding of the children of Israel, and because they put the Lord to the proof by saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Ah, okay, so notice what’s going on here. God has performed miracles for the people and yet they’re still demanding proof that he’s with them. He just parted the waters of the Red Sea in chapter 14 and 15, gave them miraculous bread from Heaven in chapter 16, now He’s given them water from the rock and what’s their response? Is the Lord really among us or not? And so Moses names the place Meribah, which means contention, and Massah, which means testing or proof,

because they were contentious, they were grumbling, and they put the Lord to the proof. They put the Lord to the test, because their hearts were hardened, because they didn't have faith. They didn't trust God even though he had done great things for them, even though he had performed signs and wonders for them.

So in today's Responsorial Psalm, the psalm begins by calling the Lord "the rock of our salvation." Hmm, what does that mean, the rock of our salvation? It's not talking about like David's rocks that he threw at Goliath; it means the rock of salvation, when Moses struck that rock and water flowed forth, it gave life to the people. It saved them from dying from thirst in the desert. It's an allusion to the rock at Meribah, and then the allusion becomes explicit when it says, "If today you hear God's voice," don't do what? Don't harden your heart as the Israelites did at Meribah and Massah, when they put the Lord to the test.

So in this case, putting the Lord to the test or hardening your heart are two ways of talking about the loss of faith, the loss of trust in God that often happens when people experience trials and suffering and tribulation. So the Israelites, remember...yeah, they've gotten out of Egypt, but they're not yet in the Promised Land. They're still in the dessert. It's still hot; they're still hungry. They're thirsty. They don't have a home. They're living in tents. They're in danger—they're in constant danger from the weather, from wild animals, from serpents. I mean, it's a formidable environment. It's a formidable environment and they're in danger. So their temptation is to despair. Their temptation is to think, God has abandoned us, when in fact this is precisely the moment where He is so close to them, and He is with them, and He's shown them He is with them through signs and wonders. And yet they still don't live by faith. They still don't trust that He can do impossible things, that He can save them from all of these earthly trials and tribulations that surround them. So that's one of the reasons the Church picks Psalm 95 to be read and prayed everyday, because basically, we need to be reminded everyday of what Habakkuk says: "The righteous live by faith."

In closing, just a little quotation from the living tradition here. There's a great section in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on unanswered prayer. And I think unanswered prayer is one of those experiences that really puts your faith to the test. If you're going through a trial, if you're going through some suffering, whether it's

a sickness or family strife or difficulties at work or whatever it might be, or you're in danger, you're in persecution, who knows, wherever you might be in the Christian world. Lord knows there are lots of places where persecution and oppression are very serious indeed. It's easy to lose faith. It's easy to be tempted to despair and ask, "Where are you, Lord? How long, O Lord?" as Habakkuk said. And two quotes from the tradition, one from Evagrius Ponticus—he says this:

Do not be troubled if you do not immediately receive from God what you ask him; for he desires to do something even greater for you, while you cling to him in prayer.³

So notice what Evagrius is saying here is one of the fruits of unanswered prayer is deeper and more intense prayer. God can actually allow you to remain in a trial precisely because—whereas you might want some temporal good that would alleviate your suffering—what He wants is the spiritual good of you growing closer to Him in prayer, precisely because you're so desperate that you need Him, and you're driven to your knees to pray more.

Another quote is from St. Augustine in his *Letters* 130. Augustine says this:

God wills that our desire should be exercised in prayer, that we may be able to receive what he is prepared to give.⁴

So remember what I said earlier, that faith isn't just an act of the intellect, like us believing? It's also, in a sense, an act of the will, right...choose to trust God. That's what Augustine is saying here. When prayers are unanswered and we have to pray more, we have to cling to God more closely in prayer, it actually exercises, it strengthens our will so that we can be prepared to receive what He is prepared to give. And I think that's very important, not just what He is to give, but when He is prepared to give it. As we saw in Habakkuk, and as we'll see elsewhere in the Gospel, there are some wrongs and there are some evils and there are some sufferings—in fact, there are many wrongs, and there are many evils, and there are

³ Evagrius Ponticus, *On Prayer* 34; cited in CCC 2737

⁴ Augustine, *Letters* 130.8, 17; cited in CCC 2737

many sufferings in this world, which will not be righted until the resurrection of the just, until the resurrection of the dead. We're going to have to wait for them to be made right. At the same time, what does God say in Habakkuk? Wait for it. It will come. The Lord will not delay, but He will speedily vindicate the righteous person who lives by faith.