

Proper 22C: Luke 17.5-10

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The other day I ran across one of the most strangely literal interpretations of a Bible story I think I've seen. It was in a book about how the human species has become significantly less violent, especially over the past few centuries. The author is Steven Pinker, a pretty famous Harvard psychologist, public intellectual, and avowed atheist. I'm guessing he might not fit your stereotype for Biblical literalists. To make his case, Pinker first describes in gory detail just how violent the ancient world was. But he offers this example from the Bible. And I quote: "The wise King Solomon proposed to resolve a maternity dispute by butchering the baby in question..."

Wait. What? You remember that story, right? An infant dies in the night and its mother switches it for the living baby of another woman. Their dispute is brought to the king, who says the only fair solution is to cut the living baby in two and give half to each. When one woman says that's a brilliant idea, Solomon, who apparently was also the world's first rocket scientist, knows she's not the mother. So he gives the child to the other woman. I was probably about six when I first heard that story in Sunday School at a church whose members were proudly literal readers of scripture. But there wasn't a single fundamentalist kid in that room who thought Solomon was actually going to cut up the baby. Come on, Dr. Pinker! While you were acquiring all that academic prestige, did you somehow lose touch with how ordinary stories work?

Do you see what I did there? How I took down a big shot intellectual, who happens not to be here to defend himself, with my impeccable, air tight reasoning? I wanted to do a mic drop, but it's just not the same with these little clip-on numbers we use. It's an old preaching trick to point out one really dumb thing a really smart person said so your listeners will give you credit for being even smarter than the smart guy. You just hope they don't find out your wife once found your lost car keys in the refrigerator, which is probably a more accurate measure of your mental prowess.

We've been making our way through some hard teachings of Jesus in Luke lately. And the first thing I'm recommending is that we not read today's gospel lesson like Steven Pinker might. The point of the story is not that Jesus was perfectly fine with slavery. The second is not to read the story like your preacher reads Steven Pinker. That is, looking to get credit for something. In fact, our need to get credit for everything from intelligence, to moral uprightness, even to how much faith we have may be precisely what Jesus is trying to help us get over.

You may have been startled to hear how Jesus's "faith the size of a mustard seed" comment actually lands in Luke 17. We generally think of it as one of his sweet, encouraging metaphors. A little faith goes a long way, right? But in this context, he seems to be saying, "Increase your faith?! There's no faith to increase in you people. If you had even the tiniest seed of the stuff, you could tell a mulberry tree to go jump in a lake and it would." It makes you wonder if to ask for more faith is the wrong question. Or maybe an absurd question when it's just one more aspect of life where we're trying to get more of something for ourselves. Maybe if you're talking about faith as if it could be personally

stockpiled, as if you could even get divine credit for the great size of your faith, maybe faith isn't what you're talking about at all.

And then Jesus starts talking about slaves. It's worth noting that he doesn't invent an imaginary slave holder in a story. He turns to his listeners and says, "Here's how you treat your slaves..." and goes on from there. He actually ends up where Jesus's teachings usually end up. "Put yourself in the place of the person you think least of here. Look at the world from the perspective of the sinner. The tax collector. The unclean one. The prodigal child. The foreign woman. The slave. From there you may begin to comprehend the upside down value system of God."

When Jesus takes us to this familiar place – the place of the least, the last, and the lost – once he's got us identifying with the enslaved ones, he tells us something specific: "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!'" Which, in this curious context, seems to mean, "Will you finally let go of your great need to get credit for everything?"

His punch line initially seems completely disconnected from the original question about faith. But what if it's not? What if there is something in our need to get credit for everything that treats faith as a righteous commodity that some of us are richer in than others?

What if the faith Jesus wants to instill in us is actually about leaving the anxious illusion that we can store up everything from wealth to moral credit behind.

We still live in a credit taking world too, don't we? Which is just another name for a blame assigning world, looked at it from another angle. We see it in our most intimate, everyday relationships and we see it playing out in our nation and across the world. You and I seem to have survived a deadly global pandemic. It was a terrifying, clumsy, brave, and bumbling collective scramble to keep people alive. But somehow, we got split into factions that don't seem to have softened even with hindsight. How is it that on this side of COVID-19 all sides of the debates still seem to be saying, "I told you so! My side knew exactly what was up with that pesky virus all along!"? We want credit for being right. And we want someone to blame for being wrong. Jesus says that's not the life of faith.

Or, say you're a southern city that has too much violent crime, especially among our poorest and most vulnerable citizens. If the crime level drops to the lowest level in 25 years, those in charge will say, "Hey, we did that!" It's also likely that when the powers that be in Washington say they're sending in the National Guard, no matter what happens between now and when the soldiers go back to their day jobs and families, faraway people will say, "We solved Memphis!" I don't think I need to point out that in all of these cases, when things trend in the wrong direction, nobody calls a press conference to take the blame.

I've stewed plenty about the coming deployment. And I don't think Memphians should avert our eyes or pretend this is national business as usual. As ever, I suspect Jesus would have us watch out especially for the ones with the least power in the story. The ones who get the least say. But when my inner blamer/credit counter nodded off for a few minutes the other day, I remembered the National Guardsmen and women I've actually known. None of them, to my knowledge, joined up in hopes of invading Canada or Chicago one day. They were kind, generous, civic minded people willing to give up a couple of weekends a month in case their country might need their service. I don't know what we'll see in the days to come. But I do know that I won't see the world clearly if my driving motive is to

make sure credit and blame get assigned to the people I already think I know deserve them. What a faithless, if all too familiar, way to live, right?

A friend of mine used to say, "It's amazing what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit." He didn't invent the phrase, so don't give him credit for that. But I've never forgotten it because I know how hard it actually is to let go of my need to get credit. Today, I think Jesus is saying I have to let go of that very need if I'm going to make room in my life for what he means by faith. Which I'm coming to believe must be something more like trust, or maybe even rest, in my belovedness by God. Something it would be absurd take credit for because that love is offered to absolutely everyone, absolutely for free. The work of faith is to trust more deeply that that love is real.

What would it take for you to give up, at least a little, the credit taking game and step a little more fully into a deeper faith in your belovedness by God?

For years now, an unlikely friend has been coming clearly to my mind in every eucharist I celebrate. When we hear Jesus's words of institution, "Drink this, *all* of you...", one person steps to the front of the great crowd of humanity included in that little word "all." It's Judas. Jesus's friend and his betrayer. The one worthy of blame if anyone has ever been worthy of blame. But Judas was the one Jesus turned to first at the Last Supper. Have you considered this? Judas was the first human being to receive the blessed sacrament that you and I will receive here today.

Friend, my question is, who's your Judas? If the question fills you with shame and blame and your instinct, as mine absolutely is, is to change the subject to some goodness I'd like a little credit for, we're still trapped in the mindset Jesus wants to free us from. But what if we could begin to see that there truly is a Love so large that it simply has no interest in credit or in blame? Even at supper with its friends the night before it went to the cross. Even then, even to its betrayer, it offered only gifts and grace to whoever would receive them.

This is the Love within which you and I and all our Judases are held. Eternally. Don't you believe that if we had even a mustard seed of trust in that Love in the depths of our wounded selves, we'd lose interest in the old blame and credit taking games, and finally become as free and loving and filled up with truly life-saving faith as Jesus is still begging us to be?