

Sermon - "Seeds of Faith"

World Communion Sunday, October 2, 2016

Scripture: Psalm 137, II Timothy 1:1-7, Luke 17:5-6b

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Our first scripture reading is Psalm 137. The Israelites greatest fear became their reality when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The walls fell, the temple was destroyed, the Davidic dynasty came to an end, and the leading citizens were taken to Babylon as exiles. The depth of their sorrow can be felt in Psalm 137, an expression of lament. This psalm is brutally honest, and expresses despair, revenge and anger before God without fear or shame. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

*1 By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our harps. 3 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! 6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. 7 Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!" 8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! 9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!*

Our second scripture reading is: 2 Timothy 1:1-7. The letters to Timothy date from a later time than the life of Paul, however they reflect Paul's teaching and desire to pass on wisdom to a younger leader. The writer of this epistle is grateful for the legacy of faith nurtured in Timothy. The tears that are also a part of Timothy's journey provide an opportunity for courage and self-discipline. This is the word of God.

*1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, 2 To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. 3 I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. 4 Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. 5 I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. 6 For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; 7 for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

Today's gospel reading in Luke 17 following a series of exhortations from Christ who expects much from his followers:

*5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 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.*

The title of the sermon: "Seeds of Faith"

The text: *"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' The Lord replied, 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you...'" Luke 17:5-6a*

Let us pray. O God, you invite us to be open and honest about our feelings. We thank you that our faith is increased when we are able to share the secrets of our hearts, the sorrows, the anger and the doubt. As we reflect on your Holy Word together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*Increase our faith!* This sounds like a reasonable request especially considering what Christ expects of those who follow him. The apostles, perhaps feeling a little overwhelmed, are simply saying, if this is so... *increase our faith... please.* Jesus responds, *If you had faith (and you do...is the inference) if you had faith the size of a mustard seed (that's not very big) you could say to this mulberry tree (which was known for it's large and elaborate root system), be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.* This is one of three references to faith and a mustard seed in Christ's sayings. In Matthew's gospel faith the size of a mustard seed is all it takes to move mountains and this same seed of faith, when nourished, grows into the largest of trees and provides shelter and a home for the birds of the air. According to Jesus, faith in one's life is empowering because faith is openness to God's power.

When Peter and I ride our tandem bicycle to Rochester on Monday mornings during warm weather for breakfast at the Lighthouse Restaurant, we ride by the intersection of Faith and Empowerment Avenues. These intersecting street signs are a moving reminder of the power faith can have in our lives.

In the epistle reading for today, young Timothy is commended for his faith, which was present in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Seeds of faith passed from one generation to another are demonstrated in a life that is not timid, but rather has a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.

Psalm 137 is also about faith. It is about faith and grief and anger in a time of unspeakable loss. In the summer of 2010, my husband Peter and his sister Sarah lost their brother Bill, unexpectedly at the age of 52 from a dissected aorta. We were all together on Lake Michigan with my family when we received the word. Together we sat on the shores and together we wept, finding comfort in one another's arms, in the silence of our disbelief (say it isn't so) and in the sound of the waves splashing on the beach.

The night before Bill's memorial service in St. Louis following a family gathering, his son William, IV, who was 24 at the time, 6'6" tall, stayed outside in the car with his mother for a long time before coming in the house. When he entered our family room, he was very quiet and pensive. We all sat in the silence and I asked him if he had a good talk with his mom. He said, "She told me I needed to pray, but I don't think God wants to hear what I have to say. I'm not feeling very religious and I certainly don't feel like praying."

I was touched by his honest response and I tried to convey, without sounding preachy, that God always wants to hear what we have to say, especially when we're not feeling religious or when what we have to say isn't very pretty. There is no feeling, no sorrow too great, no anger too strong, that God does not understand or want to hear. *God's understanding is unsearchable.* And to share our raw and candid emotions is an act of faith and what prayer is all about.

In fact our tears have a way of nourishing and strengthening our faith. Like seeds need to be watered to grow into trees, our faith is increased when we are honest with God in prayer and free

to grieve. Sometimes pain is so deep and strong that it is very difficult to express or even to acknowledge. Yet, we are welcomed to open our hearts, to grieve, and even to express our anger before God who accepts our pain in all its fullness and rawness. It is from this place of honesty that faith grows and healing begins.

When the Hebrew exiles gathered at the *rivers of Babylon* 2500 years ago, they remembered their lives in Jerusalem and they wept. It was painful, but it would have been more devastating to forget. If Jerusalem was forgotten, they would lose their faith, their identity and the Songs of Zion would be lost forever. In this psalm, we are reminded of the importance of remembering and honoring the loss in our lives! Unrecognized and invalidated grief cannot begin to be healed.

When their captors taunt them and ask them to sing their songs of Zion, in an act of defiance the people refuse to sing and hang up their harps. This action is about being in control of one's freedom to choose one's response. Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl, who was incarcerated in Auschwitz, wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning: The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me.*

On this World Communion Sunday, a psalm about remembrance cannot help but remind us of the Lord's Supper and Christ's words, *Do this is remembrance of me.* As we gather with Christians around the world, we remember God's willingness to embrace our humanity in Jesus Christ, who challenged us to be all that we can be with faith the size of a mustard seed; and who climbed the tree of Calvary to heal the sorrow and loss that are a part of the world and each of our journeys.

I would like close with a story about faith, a story about courage and power and self-discipline. Among the amazing athletes at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio, was Yusra Mardini, a young woman who competed in swimming as part of the refugee team and won her first heat in the 100 meter butterfly.

Mardini and her sister saved the lives of the 18 refugees fleeing with them from war-torn Syria on a dinghy which began to sink in the Aegean Sea near Greece. The motor had failed, nobody on the boat could swim except the sisters. The strength, courage and self-discipline of these young women ensured that their story did not end in tragedy. They leaped out of the boat, into cold waters and pushed the boat three hours in the open sea to prevent it from capsizing -- eventually making it to land. Shivering, when Mardini stepped onto dry land she fell to the ground. There she wept and she prayed.

Mardini chose to remember this moment in her life for motivation. Now living in Germany, she works tirelessly not only in swimming, but also in changing the perception of refugees around the world. "I want everyone to think refugees are normal people who had their homelands and lost them not because they wanted to run away and be refugees, but because they have dreams in their lives and they had to go." There are those who are asked to journey to places we would rather not venture, yet we strive to have their character, their strength, and their courage. It is from them we learn that the worst of humanity can bring out the best in humanity.

We gather with our own stories of tears and faith. We gather at this table in remembrance of the One who enters into the depths of human sorrows with a healing presence and who understands that the seeds of faith and empowerment are often watered by our tears and the tears of those we love. Amen.