

The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the

Sunday closest to October 5

Proper 22

Year C RCL



Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 37:1-10
Luke 17:5-10

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,

for ever and ever.

Amen.

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrong-doing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous –
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

I will stand at my watchpost,
and station myself on the rampart;
I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,

so that a runner may read it.

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

Psalm 37:1-10

Noli aemulari

- 1 DO not fret yourself because of evildoers; *
do not be jealous of those who do wrong.
- 2 For they shall soon wither like the grass, *
and like the green grass fade away.
- 3 Put your trust in the LORD and do good; *
dwell in the land and feed on its riches.
- 4 Take delight in the LORD, *
and he shall give you your heart's desire.
- 5 Commit your way to the LORD and put your trust in
him, *
and he will bring it to pass.
- 6 He will make your righteousness as clear as the light
*
and your just dealing as the noonday.
- 7 Be still before the LORD *
and wait patiently for him.
- 8 Do not fret yourself over the one who prospers, *
the one who succeeds in evil schemes.
- 9 Refrain from anger, leave rage alone; *
do not fret yourself; it leads only to evil.
- 10 For evildoers shall be cut off, *

but those who wait upon the LORD shall possess the land.

Luke 17:5-10

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.

“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, 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!’”

SERMON

This is probably no one's favorite parable. It casts God in the unappealing role of a slave driver and we'd like to imagine God as a lot less "imperial". That's the very reason it is so very important to hear, for it speaks to the very foundations of our relationship with God – God's offer of grace. To understand God's mercy, we first need to understand how our culture has instructed us in our relationship with God. Then, we can understand what Jesus is saying in this very disturbing parable.

The shorthand version of Christianity so prevalent in our culture goes something like, "Do good now, get better later". Our culture teaches that we can earn our reward by our good behavior. It's all about me, a contract to insure my good behavior by couching it in terms of my own self-interest. Such a view is counter to the

teachings of Scripture. The truth is that God owes us nothing for living good, Christian lives. God's favor and blessing are matters of grace – they cannot be earned. When we assume that we can deal with God on the basis of what God owes us by reason of our good works, we have made a basic mistake. Grace, by definition, is a free gift. If that doesn't pour sand in your gears, then you have truly lived into the light. If it does pour sand in your gears, then we need to talk. Understanding your relationship with God to have been earned by your righteousness, means that you have supped on the devil's soup. You've turned your back on God's reality and made an idol of yourself.

Let's see if we can clarify this disturbing parable by removing some contemporary bars to our understanding. We're Americans. To us, the word "slave" in this parable brings up a host of reactions that would have

been entirely foreign to the people to whom Luke directed his Gospel. If we are to relate to this parable, we have to remove the American clutter, so to speak, so let's reword it a little. Instead of a middle eastern farm, think of a large ship, manned by many sailors and captained by the man on the bridge. All aboard are engaged on the same journey. For the good of all aboard everyone is expected to execute their duties faithfully and completely. Would we expect the captain to stop the ship and reward the crew every time they performed their duties? Of course not! The captain doesn't owe you anything for stoking a boiler, and you don't stoke the boiler to obtain a reward. Your stoking is your contribution to the journey upon which you and the entire community are engaged. No sailor expects an "atta boy" for doing his job!

So you also, 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!’”

You can't puff yourself up for doing what you should. You'd do as well proudly proclaiming to everyone on the street that you brushed your teeth this morning! There should be no pride in doing what you ought, and Jesus is sanding off that self-righteous shine you inevitably award yourself. All that is required is your confidence that the wheelhouse isn't vacant and your faith in the journey, even if you are not clear on the ultimate destination. What is faith, after all, but the thrust of the soul into a future always hidden? It's what we are about. The farmer has faith in the faithfulness of soil and seasons. The stokers have faith in the direction of the captain. A tiny seed of faith is sufficient if it is real faith – faith in God revealed in Christ. It is more about

quality than quantity.

When the Apostles ask Jesus to “increase our faith” they are imagining that Jesus will grant them a promotion – that instead of boiler stoker, they might become, by reason of this increase in faith, stoker supervisors, perhaps. To do that, though, would leave the boilers un-stoked and unless the boilers are stoked, the journey cannot continue. Unlike life within a corporate structure today, within which everyone is competing for the corner office, life within God’s ship is not about rising through the ranks. It is about humble service where you have been placed.

On the other hand, if you permit yourself to believe that you can, by your adherence to rules of good behavior, by your gifts to the poor, by your care for your family, indebt God to you such that He owes you, you have moved very far, indeed, from the teachings of Christ.

Many of you know C.S. Lewis' astonishing book, "The Screwtape Letters". Lewis put his theology into letters from a head tempter named Screwtape to his nephew and junior tempter, Wormwood, about how to best damn Wormwood's "patient". Thus all the advice offered is the opposite of the Gospel. In Screwtape's letters, God is "the Enemy". Here's a passage about the way we unconsciously come to worship our own righteousness:

"What he says, even on his knees, about his own sinfulness is all parrot talk. At bottom, he still believes he has run up a very favorable credit-balance in the Enemy's ledger by allowing himself to be converted, and thinks that he is showing great humility and condescension in going to church with these 'smug', commonplace neighbors at all."¹

Our ship is filled with all sorts of people. Some, it must be said, never notice that the ship is moving. They

¹ C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters

never consciously contribute to the operation of the ship, but the captain has included them in the passenger manifest and faith teaches that the captain acts with intentionality. Some actually seek to impede the journey by sowing anger and dissension among the crew. The captain knows this. It is his responsibility. Some are sound sailors, but have bad days when they don't tend to their duties and others suffer. The captain knows that, as well, and extends his grace until the bad times resolve as he knows they will.

Our ship, however, like all ships, hits bad weather from time to time. All of us have lived long enough to have suffered loss and illness, sadness and abandonment. Sometimes, when the weather is really bad, and we are hanging over the railing of the ship, sick and alone, we think, "Any good captain would have steered us away from these shoals. Where is He?"

This is the plea of Habakkuk.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see wrong-do-
ing
and look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before
me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous –
therefore judgment comes forth
perverted.

When the bad weather comes, we’re terrified. We feel alone. We want to throw up our hands and head for the lifeboats. “Every man for himself!” we cry. But, somewhere, deep in the bowels of the ship, the faithful stokers, no less afraid, continue in their duties for they

understand that their only hope is in the man on the bridge. Screwtape sees that as a great threat to his goal of damnation and writes to his nephew, Wormwood, warning him of this threat:

“Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.”²

The journey we take is in the hands of the man on the bridge. Our lives are not about changing the itinerary nor bargaining with the captain. Our lives are about faithful service where we have been placed, courageously thrusting our souls into a future forever unknown.

Sail on, church. Sail on.

² — C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

AMEN

BENEDICTION

There is always danger that religion may degenerate into a happiness cult, and even into beauty parlor banalities that promise shallow “peace of mind”. But the word and life of Jesus are a sharp corrective.³ We have business to which to attend.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give
you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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