



The Westminster Pulpit

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“When Life is Hard” **Sermon on Luke**

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Luke 17: 1-7

Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! ²It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. ³Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, “I repent”, you must forgive.’

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ ⁶The 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.’

Life is hard! You probably already know that. If you don’t, you just haven’t lived long enough.

I suppose that’s why they call this room a “sanctuary.” Sanctus meaning “holy” and “holy” meaning “other.” It’s an “other” place. A place to seek refuge from the profane - all that which does not reflect the will and the way of Jesus.

Life is hard, and we need a little sanctuary. The Lord knows, after all, one of the first things Jesus did in his ministry was to assemble a crowd on a mountaintop. A little getaway for people who knew life was hard. You can hear the challenges of the congregation in the Sermon on the Mount.

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’
‘Blessed are those who mourn..’

'Blessed are the meek...'

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for the right way, the good way.'

'Blessed are the merciful - Those who refuse to choose an eye for an eye and seek to give healing.'

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.'

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.'

Without the presence of God, for those in mourning, hungering and thirsting, life is hard! They climbed a mountain to be with Jesus - a holy communion – and there they received a blessing.

If you're one in the crowd, then make sure you have noticed the blessing. You've climbed out of bed to get here. Why don't you take a breath and open your hands to heaven? If you dare, if not at this moment, then sometime in this day that the Lord has made, sometime in your life that the Lord has made. Open the palms of your hands to the heavens and welcome the blessing of God.

Hear the voice of Jesus falling upon you... "Blessed are you!" God is paying attention to you. "Blessed are you." The blessing falls on you like the warmth of the sun. It takes hardly any faith. Jesus says faith is "the size of a mustard seed." You can lose a mustard seed and get on with your life. Has anyone ever said to you, "Have you seen my mustard seed?" NO! It's so small that you don't know whether you have it or have lost it. You're probably carrying things in your pocket or purse right now that you don't know you're carrying. Some of them are quite gross, but you're not paying any attention to them. Jesus says faith is like that! So small but powerful!

Life is powerfully hard. I can hardly go anywhere without getting a fire hose of the latest news filtered through the brain of someone who has put their own spin on it and decides that I need a healthy portion of their opinion! Sometimes this causes me to boil up some hate against people. People, my faith has told me, have been created in the image of God. People, my faith has told me, have been invited to the banquet of the Lord. Body and Blood isn't for the few, it is for the whole world! "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son." It's no small sacrifice! But I tell you what - it doesn't take much for me to lose my religion these days.

Life is hard! But what Jesus is saying is faith is also hard!

Did you hear what Jesus said, "If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. If the person sins again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again... You must forgive, "Increase our faith!" It's hard!

It's a hard word for a hard time! And the desire is to make that word easy. If we could just limit the audience to make the world only for those who look like us, act like us, vote like us, and believe like us, we could probably keep the faith. If we could just have a borderline theology, keep Jesus like us. Have Jesus born in West Nashville, or Brentwood. I mean something modest, like the Hampton Inn. It's a hard word because we get the rebuking down. We have no problem rebuking the sins of others. Do it all the time. With righteous indignation, I might add! But we're not seeking to rebuke in order to restore, in order to save, in order to be more like Jesus.

I was surprised by the Mormons because I am at odds with much of Mormon theology. I don't have a lot of contact with Mormons. The contact that I have is that I write them on occasion, offering them the addresses of some of my more challenging members. "Here is a list of people; you might want to knock on their door. They'd be perfect for your congregation."

But I was surprised by the Mormons, who, after the "mass murder de jour," raised money not only for those families who lost loved ones to the murderer, but for the murderer's family. Because they say, Jesus calls them to do a hard thing. It changes the landscape. "You can say to a mulberry bush, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."

I don't know how I would feel if I had lost a family member to such a murder and then had that murderer's family given a gift. I don't know. Some hard acts don't need media attention; they just need to be done.

I was surprised by Erika Kirk. She said that she forgives the killer of her husband. Now, to be honest, I didn't know her husband. He wasn't on my radar. And while I didn't agree with him on some theological, political, scientific, and historical issues, if he believed what she believes, you forgive your enemies, well that could change the landscape. But it's hard, "Oh! Lord, increase our faith!"

I was surprised by the story that Rudy told on Friday about Tim Tebow. He was with him visiting in prison. Tim was the Florida Gators football quarterback who earned them a couple of national championships. I have a friend who is a Gator fan, and I found him particularly obnoxious during those years when they were winning both football and basketball championships. He's still obnoxious.

Have you ever noticed that your friends are right next to family members as some of the hardest people to love? Why is that? Lord increase my faith!

Anyway, I'm not in love with Tim Tebow. I don't agree with him on some things. But he does go to prison. "I was in prison, and you visited me." I don't visit! So, he could be right about that.

But Rudy told the story of Tim Tebow and his family when they were in Hawaii, and suddenly all their phones started going off in the hotel. It was an emergency alert that a missile had been fired from North Korea. The message: "BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL."

I don't know if you've ever received a text message like that, but when that happens, life narrows up really quickly. You really don't have time to think about the price of gasoline or who you're going to vote for in the next election. It narrows up your bucket list...to praying.

It was, of course, a human error; someone clicked "real alert" on the computer screen instead of "drill." Easy mistake. They make those boxes really small. I'm sure the culprit was rebuked, and there was repentance and forgiveness.

But, at the time of the alert, what do you do? Tim was frantic and looked over at his dad, who was at a table in his hotel room stirring his coffee, and being the embodiment of Romans 14:8, "If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Whether we live or we die, we are the Lord's."

Now, Tim had to tell that story. Why?

If we had faith the size of a mustard seed, it would be like stirring your coffee at a time when Aloha was only translated as “Goodbye world.” Faith falls on you, and you hardly feel it. Blessed are you! And then you look around and see that it has fallen on everyone, the world over! Blessed are you. Mercy for you!

These are hard times; if I’ve sinned against you with something I’ve said, I’m sorry. Please forgive me.... ...and change the landscape!

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