

Pentecost 20, October 23,24, 2022

Luke 17:1-10

Sometimes people don't think about the lasting impact their actions will make on other people down the road. That was what happened on Marion Island. It was a very small island that had been visited at times by people hunting seals or looking for shipwrecks. In 1947, the island was claimed by South Africa and a small research station was established on the island. It had some very unique birds and wildlife on the island. The island had a rocky volcanic peak 12 miles long and 7 miles wide, and it was surrounded by towering cliffs. As a result of establishing the research station, a few new buildings were built. When the new buildings were built, they suffered a mouse infestation. A simple solution was adopted. In 1949, five domestic cats were imported to get rid of the unwelcomed mice. However, someone forgot to have the cats neutered. The consequences were disastrous. Within 30 years there were 3,500 feral cats on Marion Island, feasting not on mice but the very birds the scientists were there to study. One simple action led to disastrous results. The cat population was out of control and was threatening the whole ecological system on the island. It had to be stopped. It was not in the kindest of ways. In 1977, a very specific feline virus was introduced, wiping out most of the cat population. The remaining cats were trapped or shot. By the 1990's, the cats were gone. It is just one example of the lasting impact that we make by what we do in life right now.

Like the devastation from an invasive species, our sin can cause great damage. Jesus says that the spread of sin is unavoidable. **"Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come."** We can't escape temptations. Things that cause people to sin will happen but WE don't want to be the cause for their sin and even their falling away from the Lord. Therefore, God is serious about sin. **"Woe to anyone through whom they come. It would be better for them to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble. So, watch yourselves."**

In other words, I don't want my sinful behavior to lead other people to sin. Little ones could include both children and those who are new to the faith. There are lots of things in this world which cause little ones to stumble. Look at the little children. One child gets angry and then the other responds in anger. *"But he did that to me first..."* The same thing is happening every day with adults also. One person gets anger and that anger leads the other person into the sin of anger. The cycle goes around and around and around. I think it is pretty easy for us to see how one sin can cause another person to sin. It's pretty easy for us to see how one action can lead to a disastrous impact on that person in the future.

So, what does Jesus want us to do with sin? What does he want us to do when we are hurt by someone else's sin? **"If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."** Look at those words. They are not easy to do. Rebuke. Repent. Forgive. That is not easy for us to do. There has to be a limit, right? That can wear us down, can't it? Think of the mom, who has only gotten a few hours of sleep in the last couple of days because of that newborn child that just won't sleep very long at all. Think of the person who keeps working hard at their job, but doesn't seem to get anywhere. Not only does it seem like he is getting nowhere, he never gets recognized at all for his hard work. Think of the athlete who runs a grueling marathon race, and wonders if he can make it to the end of the 26 miles. After all, there is a limit right. Ever had the thought cross your head? -- *"Where am I going to get the strength to do that? I just can't do it."* I think we have all been there.

The disciples were at that point when Jesus tells them to forgive. They knew that on their own, they could never forgive the way that Jesus wanted them to forgive. What do they ask Jesus? **"Increase our faith!"** They didn't think they had an adequate faith to trust or do the things that Jesus was saying. And then Jesus responds with a wildly vivid picture: **"If you had faith like a mustard seed, you could tell this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."** So, what does Jesus mean?

What Jesus offers them is so much more. He offers them himself. Faith isn't about the size. It isn't about my spiritual strength. Faith is plugging into a source of power that is completely outside of me. It's about trusting the strength and strength of my Savior. It is about the One upon whom my faith rests. So, if God had made a promise that you could yell at trees to relocate themselves into the heart of a body of water, and you believed that promise even just a little bit, you could order the trees and they would obey. Because in that example, the power is coming from God's promises—you're

just trusting that the promise is true and reliable. Of course, God hasn't made that promise—Jesus is using a hypothetical example. So, I would not recommend yelling at the trees the rest of the morning here to see if they'll move. Trust Jesus' promises.

How do we respond to the promises that he has given us? To answer that question, he gives this brief illustration. **“Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So, you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”** Servants do the task assigned to them. We don't serve God and our neighbor so that God will give us anything. We serve because God has already given us everything. It is his promises, his grace that has an eternal impact on us.

It wasn't easy to get rid of the cats that had overrun Marion Island. The task of doing so was pretty ugly. The task of Jesus freeing this world from sin was hard and ugly. But on the cross it was accomplished. The empty tomb is the guaranty that the payment for sin has been done. May God help us to love and forgive as he has forgiven us. Amen.