

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 80:7-15 (Andy Kort)

New Testament Lesson: Luke 17:5-10 (Mihee)

Sermon (Mihee): More Than Crumbs

For the last six months my social media was bombarded with photos of bread. Sourdough. Challah. Focaccia. Sourdough. Even more sourdough. Since everyone was home and had time apparently the thing to do was to bake. I finally gave in but rebelled against the sourdough trend by making a banana bread, and I noticed many others were also opting for the sweet, cakey bread -- we all had opinions about chocolate chips or not, walnuts or not, and many gave me their secret little tips: Buttermilk instead of milk, a dollop of sour cream or yogurt, butter or oil, using brown sugar and/or cinnamon, even how to ripen the bananas if you don't have any brown ones (this is never an issue in our house).

Our kids love banana bread, and I can't imagine anything easier to make when you have a craving for something sweet and substantial -- throw a bunch of ingredients together in a bowl, pour the batter into a pan, and bake it for an hour. There's even ways to freeze leftovers, but we've never had a chance to try anything like that. The kids, and I always eat up every single crumb.

It's World Communion Sunday, and I was tempted to add banana bread to this table full of beautiful breads, but I refrained because I knew it wouldn't last long if the Kort kids were around. Or if I was around. But, I love the thought of various kinds of bread as representative of the original intent of World Communion, a tradition that began in 1933 by Hugh Thomson Kerr who ministered in the Shadyside Presbyterian Church. According to *Presbyterian Outlook*:

Davitt S. Bell (the late Clerk of Session and church historian at Shadyside) recalled that Dr. Kerr first conceived the notion of World Communion Sunday during his year as moderator of the General Assembly (1930). Dr. Kerr's younger son, the Rev. Dr. Donald Craig Kerr, who is pastor emeritus of the Roland Park Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, was sixteen in 1933. He has related that World Communion Sunday grew out of the Division of Stewardship at Shadyside. It was their attempt to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another.

How wonderful -- churches all around the world across time and space joining hearts and minds by breaking bread together in the name of Christ in this moment. And even during the pandemic, in any times of crises, something that is not unfamiliar to the church, we are able to partake together.

It's a reminder that **there's enough for everyone at the table, in fact, more than enough to go around.**

I think it's easy for us to forget this -- so we say things like: "Increase our faith!" We want more. We think we need more. We plead for more. Even though today's perplexing text isn't about the sacred meal, or even about scarcity or food economies, there's some potential symmetry.

Our passage today is part of a long discourse of parables, stories and sayings, Jesus providing instructions on everything from welcome to healing to discipleship to losing things like sheep and coins, and the necessity of forgiveness.

Love your enemies.

Bless those who curse you.

Forgive even when it's not deserved.

Give without expecting anything in return.

Be ready to take up your cross.

In light of all that Jesus instructs his would-be followers, his disciples, it makes sense that those closest to him, the 12 closest delegates, who Luke labels "apostles" in this passage THEY respond with: Increase our faith! It's an absurdly tall order. But this is par for the course with Jesus. And so he responds, with a touch of irritation— the Greek would suggest a bit of snark with the most baffling: 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.

What an odd thing to say, odd and confusing. First of all, why would we want to plant a mulberry tree in the ocean? I can feel the twelve disciples pondering that ocean, and remembering several chapters ago being battered by waves in the middle of that ghastly

storm when Jesus came walking to them on the water, and even got Peter to do the same. It was the site of one of the strangest, most memorable miracles for the disciples.

Since they have had so much proximity to such power and ability, to such faith, I wonder if they actually believed they needed more of it. “We want to be like you, Jesus, if we had more faith we could do all these amazing and miraculous things!” So, it isn’t difficult to empathize with the disciples.

But the next part does disturb a little. Jesus proceeds to ask them whether a servant would be so cavalier as to demand a meal with his master, or special praise for doing his basic household duties.

Writer and speaker, Rachel Held Evans¹, who has since joined the Saints, preached on this passage in 2013, and she gives words to our discomfort: “Now, this may strike us as a little odd because we know Jesus wasn’t in the habit of speaking unkindly about slaves or people of low status. Prior to this chapter we have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, where a beggar is assigned higher honor than his rich neighbor. We know Jesus often compared the kingdom to a banquet in which all are invited—slave and free, rich and poor alike—and he often talked about how the least among us would take the high place of honor at that Table to eat with the Master. Jesus was in the business of turning hierarchies and power structures on their head, so why does he resort to conventional social structures to make this point to the disciples?”

I wonder if Jesus saw the slippery slope they were on which seemed to focus more on magic and miracles, more on power and privilege, rather than that of humility, of discipleship. From the beginning, Jesus’ ministry was about lifting up the humble and humbling the proud, of challenging those in authority and giving voice to the marginalized, so it’s safe to assume that there must have been an element of pride or entitlement at work in the disciple’s request to warrant this sort of response. Throughout the gospels Jesus reserves his harshest criticisms for the proud and saves his most biting satire for the folks who need to be brought down a peg.

And yet, the act of forgiving, forgiving over and over, dozens of times, each and every day, perhaps this does require more faith.

To forgive: The harsh look. The rude word. The thoughtless step. The forgotten promise. The blatant dishonesty. The unnecessary unkindness. The unjust action. This

¹ A great deal of this sermon was inspired by my dear friend Rachel Held Evans who died in May 2019. She was a writer, speaker, preacher, a wonderful human being, and someone that I am continuously guided by today. <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/make-it-work-homily-luke-17>

was what instigated the disciples plea: Increase our faith! So, maybe Jesus understood this, and sympathized with them, “forgiving others” so many times being perhaps as absurd and baffling as a mulberry tree growing in the ocean. So he gives them instead -- NOT just a reminder or picture but a PROMISE that faith is like a mustard seed, and that seed’s destiny is to become a tree whose branches reach for the skies, the only limit to its possibilities.

Rachel continues: I wonder if Jesus wasn’t reminding his disciples that faith isn’t manifested in flashy magic tricks, or pointless, self congratulatory displays of power, or in destruction and uprooting, but in daily acts of faithfulness—those quotidian acts of obedience that grow the kingdom, one carefully tended little mustard seed at a time.

Isn’t this the way of Jesus? To take the small things. The ordinary things. Seeds and crumbs. These remind us of the work of faith, which is to bear God’s kingdom to the world. God’s kingdom of love and welcome, of peace and hope. The extending of God’s forgiveness, God’s love and acceptance, over and over. When we gather around the table, not only is there enough for everyone at the table, these little sips and tastes, this bites, these morsels, these crumbs themselves are more than enough. More than enough to feed us, to inspire us, and to get us through one more day of ploughing and tending to the fields of God’s love, one more meal to set around God’s table of love.

These works are the essentials, and the very least we are called to do as disciples, as worthy servants of the Christ. **These little bits remind us that what we need in this life isn’t glamorous or glorious, but simple. Kindness. Welcome. Forgiveness.** They are why we are able to gather together around the table of reconciliation in the first place. And the strange and beautiful miracle is that we need only a seed, only a crumb, only a sip, to taste and see the expansiveness of God’s goodness in the world.

You were called to this table. You were fed at this table. You were united at this table. Now, you are sent from this table into all the world. Go therefore into the world, with courage. Set a place for all who hunger. Fill the cup of all who thirst. And as you go, May the Spirit of power and love attend you, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ uphold you, and may the great faithfulness of our God sustain you, now and forever. Amen.²

² Charge and Blessing written by Matt Gaventa, PC(USA) World Communion Sunday Liturgy 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time October 2, 2016.