



Muscle Memory

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Year C, Ordinary 27

Richard Rohr. Everything Belongs.p106, 108

Luke 17:5-10

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The world is a rough place at the moment.

Everywhere you turn there is violence and death, there is conflict and cancelling, there are climate catastrophes, there is extreme wealth and unimaginable poverty and injustice that marginalises whole groups of people. In the face of it all we feel so small and inadequate.

What have we come to?

Yet as I meander about in the early morning with my cat - who likes to pause frequently and watch and listen - I see the wonderful colours of sun rise, I hear the marvelous bird song, I see the first spring buds on the flowering trees, I see the animals greet each other - and all seems very well in my small corner. And I wish it could be like this for everyone, everywhere.

Surely the goal for all nations and the social expectations of all people is secure housing, freedom from fear and violence, a sufficiency of food and medical care and education, surely it includes respect for each other, kindness, the opportunity to live with dignity, *and the opportunity to pause and enjoy the beauty of the world.*

I wonder where the church is and what we are offering people in this mix of extremes today.

I feel as though I completely understand the apostles in their plea to Jesus in Luke's story we heard this morning when they cry "give us more faith". I want to say *if only I had more faith, more wealth, or more power, or more impressive networks* I'd be able to make a better contribution to the work of social justice: to increasing access to human rights.

These are the goal of nations that signed up to the United Nations Charter; of nations that emerge from a Judeo-Christian heritage. We want this for our own nation and for all people everywhere.

Those first decades of the second century, when Luke was writing, were tumultuous times. His audience of Jesus followers were a community of embattled, marginalised people among other groups of marginal people, trying to eke out a life in the face of the reassertion of Roman imperial power and the restructuring and reclaiming of identity by the Jewish community after the fall of the temple

30 - 40 years previously. We are told there was much poverty, violence, and power-mongering at the time; much 'othering' and marginalising.

It seems quite appropriate therefore for Luke to present a story to them about Jesus in which the disciples ask for '*more faith*'. Luke's audience undoubtedly felt they needed *more faith* simply to hold on to the vision and promise of Jesus.

In our own times we are told frequently by social media, peers and advertisers that having *more* of this or that: more money, youth, beauty, power and influence, and a better job with status and information for example will make it possible to achieve our goals - to have what we are worth, what we deserve. *Surely more is much better than less, bigger much better than smaller! It is the common sense of our day.*

And surely, if we had more of these things we would be able to do something about the climate catastrophe we are living in, the systemic racism that plagues not only Aotearoa New Zealand but many countries around the world, the sexism that restricts and diminishes the lives of women and the breakdown of democracy as we have known it that we are experiencing. "Dear God, give us more!"

And again, as usual, Jesus turns the whole thing upside down. It is not more that is required! He points to the tiniest of seeds, the mustard seed, as an indication of all the faith needed to do impossible things!

This is subversive thinking for those first 'hearers' of Jesus living under Roman occupation. Jesus insists that a little faith can do the impossible, a little faith can resist empire.

Faith isn't about quantity, it's about courage, imagination, trust. I think it's about 'muscle memory'.

Have you ever tried to learn a musical instrument or a different language? If you have you will probably have discovered, as I did, that many repetitions of small movements or many repetitions of short phrases means they more readily flex the fingers to the right keys, and more readily flow off the tongue when the time is right to use them. We need to practice what we say we believe in the same way. Practicing the expectations of our faith even in small gestures: small expressions of justice, small expressions of love, compassion, and outrage can make a huge difference to the big picture when we are called on to act. Together, collectively, our expressions of faith our demonstrations of a lived gospel can do the impossible.

Faith is not transactional however. We don't live justly so we will be rewarded with more faith. No, we live justly because that is what faith requires, it is what 'love one another as I have loved you' looks like. Faith is about trusting that the work of God happens through repeated small acts of love repeated demonstrations of concern, repeated efforts to include, even if no one notices.

We have to practice our 'faith muscles' as it were and by example invite others to do the same, in hopefulness and trust.

But what about the servants? (Luke always seems to push his stories to an extreme to make his point). The context of the time included servants, and Jesus was using a common situation to further illustrate his point. Jesus was not arguing the rightness or wrongness of servants, but rather arguing against a sense of entitlement! The servants don't get any special consideration for doing what is expected of them - why should you expect a reward for doing what is expected of you?

What is expected of us by faith is more than simply doing what the law requires of us.

As Richard Rohr points out we can stay free from trouble by choosing to do what the law requires, but the 'freedom' the gospel promises requires us *to want to do* those things that Jesus proclaims in the gospels – the things *we have to do* to stay true to our calling as the 'body of Christ'

So

- we don't embrace the cause for justice and work for peace and non-violence, for climate justice and an end to 'othering'
- we don't advocate and petition for an end to the housing crisis and for pay equity

So we will be rewarded with more faith or more wealth or more plaudits. We do it because it is what we are expected to do even if we feel small and irrelevant.

Jesus' teaching challenges us to see that small faithful actions matter. Being consistent in our demands for justice and an end to fear and deprivation and marginalisation matters.

Being consistent in

- Advocating for affordable housing
- Welcoming the stranger
- Standing with our Te Tiriti partner
- Protesting violence

Being fully present and attentive to the circumstances

- When we listen
- When we provide a meal or a can of beans
- When we resist fear with compassion

All our seemingly small acts uproot mulberry trees!

And the good news is we don't need more faith to change the world. But we do need to practice using our faith muscles, to practice living the gospel, practice living faithfully every day because it is who we are.