

Habakkuk 1: 1-4; 2: 1-4
2 Timothy 1: 1-7
Luke 17: 1-6

Rekindling the Love
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We are living in troubled times – we hear this so often. Anyone who pays attention to the news hears of injustice, violence, dishonesty, and personal unkindness. Many of us want to cry out, with the prophet Habakkuk, ‘O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry “Violence!” and you will not save?’ ‘Whether it is the shooting of unarmed black motorists, or the shooting of policemen by a sniper, or the shooting of a six-year-old at school, or stabbings in a mall, or the beating of a transgender woman, or the bombing of a Syrian hospital - how long will we cry out in shock and sorrow? The hatred and divisions at the root of all this pain – they seem like insoluble problems, not to be solved by legislation, but only by the change of many hearts.

It would be nice to think that religious institutions would be at the forefront of the heart-changing business. But all too often we flame the forces of division. Fueled by our particular interpretation of our sacred literature, we draw the lines of our social factions, our moral factions, our political factions, our intellectual factions. And we scorn those who are wrong-headed or foolish enough not to take our side. We prefer to remain in the echo chambers of narrow affirmation and identity.

Into this world of division comes this Sunday, World Communion Sunday. Back in the 1930’s (another troubled decade), starting with the Presbyterian church, there was an 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.” (as described by John A. Dalles) Somehow, through the celebration of communion, or the eucharist, members of churches would call to mind the overriding unity at the heart of our faith. This was a visionary concept, and to some extent it remains a vision – as our individual Christian communities continue to disagree and offend each other regularly.

In our Gospel passage today, Jesus gives his disciples some instruction on life inside the Christian community. This teaching was probably addressed to a fairly small group, as all the Christian communities of the first century were small, and only tenuously connected to others. This teaching for a local community is pretty brief. In short, it says, rebuke those who sin, forgive those who repent. Even if someone sins and repents seven times in one day, just keep on forgiving. In fact, he says, you **must** rebuke, and you **must** forgive.

This prompts his friends to say, “Increase our faith!” It’s an interesting response. But maybe not surprising: the high standard of repeated forgiving (not to mention rebuking **and** forgiving) seems beyond human capacity. Seven times a day – eventually you start to feel exhausted, or like a doormat, or just really annoyed. And imagine being rebuked seven times a day! Not so much fun. The disciples know they need help. And so they ask for a larger measure of faith. The word “faith” here does not mean assent to a certain set of beliefs. It means trust and loyalty. They are saying, "Increase our trust! Increase our loyalty! Otherwise the way of life you’ve given us is just too hard.”

Someone – Jesus? The Gospel writer Luke? – had a sense of humor when confronted with this desperate request. Responding to the idea of increase, he says, “You just need a tiny grain of trust and loyalty, just the size of a mustard seed, and amazing things will happen.” I think he was pulling their leg with the mental picture of a trees being uprooted and planted in salt water. Who would even want to do that? The point is that trust, and loyalty and devotion don't come in sizes. They are not nouns that you can measure, but verbs of doing and direction. We know from the whole of Jesus' life and teachings, from his death and resurrection, that he didn't **want** to cast mulberry trees into oceans. He had better things to do.

We have learned that Jesus struggled to bring the realm of God to our earthly reality. He taught and demonstrated how to live as a citizen of the community called the Kingdom of God. The tiny mustard seed of trust makes it possible to start to live this out. It is not about making orchards in the sea, but about encouraging seemingly impossible visions. It is about thinking outside the box. Things do not have to be the way they are. It is also a manifesto against what appear to be overwhelming odds. Change is possible.

When Jesus talks about "faith," he's not talking about what you do in your head; he's talking about what you do with your hands and your feet, your wallet and your influence, your power and your time. He's talking about hearts full of trust overflowing into action. Faith in Jesus is not shown by saying or thinking things about him, but by following him.

Recently I read a piece by a former Vermont pastor, Emily Heath, about the comfortable quality of American mainline protestant churches. We congratulate ourselves when we survive in a rather hostile world, and hope to appeal to as many people as possible. We have forgotten what it is to be fired up (or we might say, “rekindled”) about our faith. She writes, “We stop doing the unique things that churches can do well, and start doing a mediocre job on what everyone else is doing. Then, we're surprised when it doesn't work.”

Perhaps, one of the “unique” things the church is called to do is a faithful demonstration of being at the same time rebuking and forgiving. I know, who wants to be known as someone who is good at rebuking? Can we at least agree that attention should be called to major flaws in society and country and community, and, at times, individuals? This is exactly what Habakkuk was doing when he prayed to God about the wrongdoing he saw around him – a prayer, by the way, that was meant to be overheard as prophetic rebuking. The prophet and the people then wait, watchfully, faithfully, for God's answer and God's vision.

Perhaps another “unique” thing the church is called to be is a place of honest, candid conversation about “destruction and violence...strife and contention.” I said earlier that we live in troubled times – though I suppose that many generations have said the same thing. Precisely because this space has been used through so many times of trouble - through drought and flood, through the time of slavery and the war between the states, through depression and world wars, through personal and national tragedies – precisely because the prayers of the faithful have gone up in this room, precisely because the walls have been hallowed with heartfelt hymns, it retains an aura of holy purpose. And what purpose could be more holy than listening and understanding?

Tiny seeds of faith, hope and love have been scattered. Trees wait for new planting. Here we tend our souls for the work ahead. I pray that we will rekindle the gift of God in our lives and our congregation for the healing of ourselves and the world.

On this World Communion Sunday, I will celebrate the sacrament with faith, hope and love. Faith that God has a vision for the appointed time and can work miracles with the raw material of our lives. Hope that in communion meals all around the world, people are praying that God's will be done. Love for the One who rekindles the gift of God that is within us.

I end with a blessing for World Communion Sunday, written by Jan Richardson:

And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.
And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.
And our aching
will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.
And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.
And we will become bread
for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast. Amen.

