

P17C 2022 Luke 17:5-10; Lamentations 1:1-6, 3:19-26

The year I spent as campus chaplain at West Virginia University was not part of a well-thought-out career plan. The former chaplain had been elected bishop, and a new pastor was called to take over, but quite late in the summer, they backed out of the job. A seminary friend who was involved with the ministry messaged a few of us and, half joking, said that if we ever wanted to try our hand at campus ministry, now was our chance. That conversation happened a day after the congregation I was serving held its first meeting to re-organize into a multi-point parish—a process which would eventually result in me being unemployed. But in the long run, I knew I wanted to stay in the Allegheny Synod, not WV. So I messaged my friend and said, also half joking, that I'd serve as *interim* chaplain for a year until they could reopen their call process for someone permanent. That was a Wednesday, I interviewed on Monday, I had a contact by the end of that week, and because the university chapel held services Sunday evenings, I was able to start almost immediately while I was wrapping up in the congregation. Those of you who have been through a leadership transition in an ELCA congregation know that is absolutely not how mobility is supposed to work in the church; these things usually take months. So, having had not very much time to plan or think things through, I went to that interview, for a position that hadn't even existed a week prior, and I was suddenly overcome with dread and panic. I had never worked in campus ministry before; campus ministry wasn't even a huge part of my own college experience; I would have to commute and live part time out of the state; I didn't know the local pastors; I didn't know my way around Morgantown; and I was too young to be the comforting, wise mentor, but way too old to pass for cool. I had to fight hard the instinct to run. I remember that experience when someone mentions *courage*, which is not feeling fearless, but is doing the scary thing while being afraid. Essentially faith is the same: faith isn't waiting to *feel like* we're able to do the hard thing; faith is *doing* what we're called to do, even and especially when we doubt.

Had the lectionary started us at the beginning of chapter 17, the apostles' request for increased faith would make more sense. Jesus tells them that in this new way of life to which he was calling them, if someone sinned but then repented, even seven times in a day, they had to keep forgiving the offender. That is why the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith, because they doubt their own ability to do what Jesus has told them to do. And we can't really blame them, we who live by the proverb *fool me once shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me...* that popular wisdom doesn't even make room for a true second chance let alone a seventh. Jesus tells the apostles that if their faith was the size of a mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds, they could command the trees to uproot and replant themselves. But that's neither challenging them to test God nor scolding them for not already having enough faith; Jesus is trying to change the way they understand faith; that faith isn't something we *have*, faith is something we *do*.

The readings from Lamentations help us understand this idea of faith not just as a measurable amount of belief but as action—living in faithfulness to God’s call. The book of Lamentations is just what it sounds like: the passionate grieving of the ancient Israelites as they struggle to survive exile. Zion, that is Jerusalem, the home of the Temple and the abiding place of the Lord, had been emptied of God’s people; nobody was left to come to the festivals; the people were living in Babylon as captives of their enemies, cut off from their home and their God. The exile lasted long enough that the generations who were originally driven out never made it back. These are the anguished prayers that teach us how to speak to God when our circumstances lead us to doubt, despair, and fear. Even the very first line still hits home: *How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!* Couldn’t we say that about the coastal towns that were destroyed this week by Hurricane Ian? Couldn’t we say that about the ravages of the pandemic—both the loss of life and the way the isolation and detachment in our communities persists? Yet the exiles kept living and praying to God anyway, just as we do.

Lamentations isn’t a flippant response to grief, but instead teaches us to admit the depths of our hardships: *My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.* That is the kind of struggle from which we only have respite in sleep—and which comes rushing back after those first few moments of consciousness in the morning, the breath before we remember the loss or the pain or the fear that leads us to pray: *Lord, give me faith!* But in the midst of their suffering, the exiles also knew where to locate their hope: *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.* Whether it is the exiles awaiting restoration, Jesus’ apostles trying to forgive seven times a day, or us struggling to live not by our wits but by God’s word, the faith that we need isn’t our own: the great faithfulness is the faithfulness of God to us—not the other way around.

One of the hymns we sing most often at funerals is *Great is Thy Faithfulness*—not because those are times when we feel like *we* have sufficient faith to meet our grief, but because those are the times when we recognize best that it’s only God’s faithfulness to us that sustains us. Jesus essentially tells the apostles that they don’t need more faith so that they stop thinking it’s all up to them. God is acting in, with, through, and for them, and God by God’s nature is faithful. It is Jesus, God incarnated, Emmanuel, *God with us*, who calls the disciples to godly living—and tells them not to expect some kind of trophy when they do what they are supposed to do. But he can say that to them because he is with them, just as we can hear God’s call in hope and confidence, not because of our own abilities, but because God is with us. There is nothing easy about the human experience, and the Christ-like path of humility, love, forgiveness, and grace requires a lifelong struggle against our baser instincts. But the way to that life isn’t finding more faith in ourselves; instead, may we remember the words of faithful lament: *“You are all that I have,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in you, O Lord.”*