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C: 17th Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 27/ Proper 22
Luke 17:5-6

2 October 2022
Salem, Bridgeport

“Just Trying to Be a Blessing”

My late mother loved gardening.
One of my favorite pictures depicts her standing next to a tall bloom
with a big smile on her face.
It’s as if she were telling the camera, “Look at what I did!”

My mother was from the Philippines and was endlessly fascinated
by the different kinds of flowers that bloomed in Indiana, where I grew up.
Sometimes, she would stop along the side of the road when she saw beautiful flowering plants, and she would
pick them to plant in her own flower garden.
Yellow was her favorite color,
so she was particularly fond of one plant that bloomed yellow.
So she stopped along the side of the road and picked this flowering plant for her garden.
She said, “I’m going to plant this in the center of my garden, it’s so beautiful.”
So she did.
And it bloomed for weeks and weeks,
and, to her delight, it spread to every corner of her flower garden.

Meanwhile, I suffer from seasonal allergies.
This particular summer was extremely difficult for me, for some reason.
I had to start seeing an immunologist and got tested for all sorts of allergies and ailments.
So I got tested, and as it turned out, I was allergic to several things:
mold, trees, grass, dust... and this flowering plant with yellow blooms called... ragweed.
I had to find out what ragweed looked like, so I went to the library (this was before Google)...
and that flower my mother was so fond of —
that she stopped along the side of the road to place in the center of her flower garden —
was actually a weed.

Ragweed.
I told my mom, and she laughed at me.
Then I was like, “So what are you going to do about it?”
And she responded, willfully, “It’s pretty.”
So she kept her pretty weed, and that’s when I started taking Benadryl. (Gotta keep the peace.)

Despite my affliction with seasonal allergies, I do love camping.
When I was in college, I was part of a ministry team that would go to youth summer camps
and do faith-based singing and acting.
The group was called “Parable.” (True story.)
Anyway, we would see all sorts of youth come through the camps —
the popular kids, the jocks, the goths, the rule-followers, the nerds, the dorks,
the Bible quizzers, (sadly) and then there were the loners.
I also observed the talents
of really skillful and heartfelt youth-group advisors and camp counselors.

There was this one camp counselor that I really admired.
He was young and hip and really knew how to relate to the campers.
But the greatest quality I noticed about him
was how he became a friend to all the loners at the camp.
There's a girl sitting alone in the cafeteria;
he'd pull her over to his table and break bread with her.
There's a kid out on the softball field who's not doing too well;
he goes out and makes a fool out of himself just to make the kid look good.
So, as impressed as I was with this guy, I ask him what he's up to.
He put his hands up in the air and said: "Hey, just trying to be a blessing!"
That kinda became a motto for Parable, our ministry team.

Whenever anyone did something for someone else,
the member of Parable would say, "Hey, just trying to be a blessing."
And as the members of Parable started to say it, the campers started to catch on.
Soon, this quality of care for one another washed over the campgrounds.
It caught on like wildfire.
You might even say it spread like my mother's ragweed.
Campers started doing nice things for others.
I believe it was because their consciousness was raised to the point
that they were aware of the feelings and needs of others.
And let me tell you, it is so gratifying to see a 14-year-old kid do something sacrificial
for another person and say, "Hey, just trying to be a blessing."

It's not just a novel idea: being a blessing to others.
Believe it or not, we are called to love whomever we see.
In fact, we are commanded to do it — even if people are doing the opposite.
And so it is with today's Gospel reading.

Luke 17:5-6

⁵ *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"*

⁶ *The Lord replied, "If you had the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

On its face, it seems pretty self-explanatory.
But there's so much more meaning if we dig just below the surface.
This is one of those "lost in translation" issues —
not so much because of the Greek-to-English translation,
but more because of the geographical and cultural differences.
The modern reader comes away from this and says, "Well, yes, yes...
the mustard seed is so tiny, so a little bit of faith goes a long way. I get that."
But the "first century, Middle Eastern reader" would have understood it differently.
You see, you don't want to plant mustard seeds on your property if you don't have much space. Why?
(Excited) Cuz it's a mess. It'll spread all over the place.
And that — Jesus is saying... — That is what the Kingdom of God is like!
It spreads all over the place,
and when it is planted in our hearts, and we sow seeds of the result of faith — love —
its pollen gets all over everything.
We can't contain it. God's love becomes our love, and it becomes an invasive species that takes over.
Nothing else is safe.
Love is the all-consuming weed that will choke-out everything that isn't love.
That is the nature of the Kingdom of God.

(Eeyore) “OK, Daniel, I can show God’s love, all right. I can be a blessing to others. I’ll try it out.”
Good. That’s a start.

“Uh oh, he’s going to say that’s not good enough, isn’t he?”
You’re a smart congregation!

One of my teachers had the privilege of meeting Nelson Mandela
a few years after he was released from prison.

During that meeting, my teacher asked Mandela what many of us would probably ask
if we encountered a man who spent 27 years in prison:

“I’ll bet you’re really angry at those people who imprisoned you for over a quarter of a century.
I’ll bet you feel like that part of your life was completely wasted.”

Mandela paused, reflected, and spoke plainly: “I am not angry, and it was not a waste.”
(Incredulous) My teacher was blown away!

“What do you mean you’re not angry. What do you mean it wasn’t a waste...”

Mandela interrupted: “You’re missing something really important.

You see, if I got out of prison alive, I would be elected President,
there would be an uprising, and apartheid would cease.

And that’s what happened.

My teacher was like, “yeah, exactly!”

Mandela continued, “But, if I were to have died in prison,
there would have been an uprising, and apartheid still would have ceased.

And so, I do not hate them; they are my fellow countrymen.

And that time... It wasn’t wasted. That 27 years was all preparation.”

(Excited) Now that is what I call a mustard seed explosion!

But you know what?

Within you is the same power to choke out everything that isn’t love.

You have that same power to forgive & love & bless as Nelson Mandela, as that camp counselor, and as Jesus.

And sometimes, love looks like opposing stupid rules and laws:

Sometimes, love feels impossible.

WAY too complicated, so we might as well give up.

Sometimes love looks like forgiveness.

Sometimes love requires that we give more
than we would normally be expected to give.

That is what it means to be Christ-like, or Christian.

Can we grasp Jesus’ image of God’s Kingdom?

Can we be that mustard seed, that ragweed, invasive species that loves...
even where it doesn’t make sense to do so?

That is what we are called to do.

That is what we are commanded to do.

So how does one increase in faith?

Jesus’ answer was: Be expansive.

So when people tell you not to love someone based on some deeply held religious belief,
or some arbitrary human rule,

kindly remind them of the ever-spreading, ever-growing, ever-expanding, vast, illimitable
Kingdom of God.

And when people ask you why your love keeps creeping into where it shouldn’t,
you might respond very lovingly, “Hey, just trying to be a blessing.”