

Back in August and again next week I'll get to spend some time in New England. Pennsylvania boasts its fair share of history, but we have to go north and east for some of America's legendary events, especially from the colonial period. From my travels I have a t-shirt that says "1692—They Missed One" which is a reference to the Salem witch trials. But of course, that is a misleading name for what happened, right? Because in Salem, the colonists weren't burning witches, they were burning women. That miscarriage of justice and the religious fervor used to rationalize it certainly informed our nation's founders when they separated religion from our laws and established a high bar for the burden of proof in our courts, as the judge reminded us last week when I was *not* selected for jury duty. Yet, nearly three centuries after Salem's tragic chapter, Dr. King still described the arc of the moral universe bending towards justice, but, he said, that arc is long; in other words, our progress has been slow. Human beings, including those who claim to follow the precepts God set out in holy scripture, have always struggled to establish and live up to the ideals of a just society. As we slowly work toward the kingdom God envisioned, it can be hard to keep the faith.

Situating our readings in context, the apostles do not ask the Lord to increase their faith totally out of the blue. Jesus just warned them that occasions for sin are bound to come up, and that if a person sins against them, even seven times, but repents, they are required to forgive. No wonder the apostles doubt that they are faithful enough to live up to Jesus' standard. So they ask: *Increase our faith!* as if faith is 'stuff' of which they have too little. But Jesus does not grant the premise of their request. *The tiniest amount of faith is enough for you to tell trees to uproot and replant themselves*, Jesus says. They don't need more faith, they just need to act according to the faith they already have. And they have already demonstrated that they have enough faith—whatever 'enough faith' means—when Jesus sent them out, two by two, and they returned, rejoicing that in Jesus' name they could even make demons submit to them. If they have enough faith to do those kinds of signs in Jesus' name, then they should have enough faith to forgive the people who keep sinning against them. They just have to do it.

Jesus' hypothetical question about who would serve a slave instead of expecting the overworked slave to continue serving them sounds strange to us because it is so far outside the realm of our cultural context; but master-slave relationships were part of Jesus' society. We might expect Jesus to denounce the entire concept of slavery, and that would be consistent with his overall message, but that is not what he is saying right here. Here he uses the image of waiting at table to encourage the apostles to do what they're supposed to do—exercise the faith they have to serve other people—and not think of that as something extraordinary or worthy of great reward. Faithfully living in service to others is the very benchmark of Christian discipleship, because the

irony in this scenario is that Jesus, the Master, *did* reverse roles and, acting in self-sacrificial service, *did* make himself subject to others who were supposed to be subjects of his. Jesus isn't approving a social caste system or legal enslavement; he's encouraging us to *choose* to selflessly serve others, to have faith that compassionate, merciful, forgiving, service is the right way to live, even when the world around us teaches us to pursue our own self-serving interests.

If we try to follow Jesus' example, if we choose to forgive people who keep sinning against us, if we continue to serve people who never seem to acknowledge the effort or return the favor, if we stick to Jesus' rules when, day in and day out, we can see that the rule-breakers are the ones who get ahead in this world, it can start to feel like a burden that is too great to bear. *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?* Habakkuk asked. *Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Justice never prevails!* The prophet was complaining about the failure of the Israelite people to live according to the vision God set for them in the Law. Their society, which was supposed to be a model of righteousness and justice, had become so unprincipled that victims of persecution and exploitation couldn't even seek justice, because the courts were corrupted. How does one keep the faith, or continue to act faithfully, when even the safe-guards fail and circumstances seem hopeless?

The lectionary skips the bad news, that is, the consequences of the Israelites' bad behavior that Habakkuk laments. The Lord essentially says, *Well, if Israel doesn't want to live according to the justice and righteousness of the Law that I gave them, they can find out the hard way what living in exile under Babylonian occupation is like.* So things were going to get worse before they got better. But Habakkuk waits for what else the Lord will say, because remember that the theme of the prophets, really of the entirety of scripture, is that even when the people are unfaithful to God, God remains faithful to the people, faithful to the covenants God made with our ancestors, because God, by nature, is faithful. So the Lord says, *There is still a vision for the appointed time; If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come...the righteous live by their faithfulness.*

Some days, God's vision of justice and righteous compassion seems too far off, too far for us to wait for it, so far we doubt that it will ever come to fruition, or at least that it will come within our lifetime. Haven't we cried, *How long, O Lord,* and prayed for God's kingdom to come, and maybe even prayed *Increase our faith!* Yet faith isn't stuff that we need more of; faith is living as God calls us to live even when the world around us tells us to not to hope, not to trust, not to forgive, not to care. Bravery isn't being fearless; it's acting in spite of fear. Faith doesn't require certainty; it's following God's call in spite of the seeds of doubt that our circumstances sow. Faith isn't what we have, it's what we do. *There is still a vision; it will surely come.* As we wait, may we live by our faithfulness.