Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost October 2, 2016

All Saints’ Church Year C

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 2 Timothy 1:1-14

Psalm 37 Luke 17:5-10

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable onto you, Dear Lord, our Redeemer and Sustainer.

One of my favorite theologians is Howard Thurman, a philosopher, civil rights leader, preacher, and university professor who has been so articulate about the power of the Effervescent Spirit within all of us.

I saw an interview of him, while he was sitting in his office in San Francisco, near the end of his career, a man probably close to his 80’s, and the interviewer asked him about a portrait that hung on the wall behind him, of a woman, probably in her 50’s with her head held high.

Howard Thurman looked straight into the camera and said that it was a picture of his beloved grandmother, a framed picture that he carried into every one of his offices as a reminder of strength and faith and fidelity. She had been born into slavery, emancipated as young teenaged girl; and yet, of course, she still worked all her life as an indentured servant on a tenement farm. She raised her grandchildren, after Thurman’s father died when Thurman was only seven, and his mother became the family’s only breadwinner.

“When we would come home, discouraged, tired, overwhelmed by the inequities and vagrancies of life, my grandmother would sit us down, making sure that we were sitting tall. And she would say, ‘You pay no mind to people who want to bring you down. You are not a slave. You, my dear child, are a child of God. Don’t ever forget that. Stand firm. God seeks you out, loves you, wants you, needs you. There is nothing you can do to make God love you more. There is nothing you can do to make God love you less. Just as you are, God delights in you, always; you are precious, beautiful and necessary for God’s purpose in this world to be manifested. Trust that you are somebody.’

The intensity of Thurman’s words as he leaned so intentionally into the camera, into my own living room, brought tears to my eyes, as I recognized that he was who he was because of his grandmother. Born as a slave, yet this grandmother became the Christ for him; his “Grandmother Jesus” spoke words that liberated him. As Thurman has shared often, “I caught the ‘contagion’ of religion from my grandmother. Imagine: the Creator of Existence also created me.”

And so let us not think that these words of Jesus this morning in the gospel of Luke endorse the institution of slavery, though of course they have been lifted out of the context to do just that. Jesus, in his usual style, is taking everyday occurrences, evil or not, and he is making his radical point about the power of faith. Your faith, even though it’s as small as a mustard seed, can do astonishing things like rearranging the landscape….. your faith can uproot worry, fear and anxiety and throw them into the sea.

Really Jesus? How can that be? A mustard seed held in my thumb and my index finger can’t even be seen? How can I do powerful things?

His answer: By becoming a servant of all, a slave to God’s will, just as He did when he laid his life down for his friends out of love.

Oh that?! Jesus, do you have another answer?

I love the apostles who in their anxiety, say to Jesus, “Increase our faith!”

This is how our gospel passage begins this morning. They are responding to what Jesus had just said…. “you must forgive, always, 7x70 times.”

Oh no, not that, too. I’m with the apostles. I think forgiveness, especially when you have been really hurt, especially as a victim, is darn near impossible. Why can’t I just do my faith thing, and put my inability to forgive over here in some tight compartment, which by the way, I can completely justify. Sometimes there are NOT two sides to every story. Put it away, nicely sealed, and just keep on living.

One of the best challenges to this seemingly possible solution came to me from Br. Curtis Almquist, of the Society of St. John the Evangelist.

It goes something like this: To not forgive someone is to incarcerate them in your memory- your offender being the prisoner; you being the prison guard. The tragedy is that both of you are in prison. And forgiveness does not necessarily mean reconciliation. That may never come, nor should it. Reconciling with a rapist or a murderer is not what may be called for….. Forgiveness is different.

Forgiving is setting someone free for your sake. By forgiving someone, you unbind yourself from the power this person continues to have on you- from whom you have experienced an injury, offense, or betrayal. To not forgive will leave your wound vulnerable to infection which can metastasize into resentment.

Nelson Mandela on being freed from 26 years of imprisonment in South Africa felt bitter toward his captors; however, he was determined to claim his inner freedom, to forgive and not to resent. “Resentment,” he said, “is like drinking poison and waiting for it to kill your enemy.”

Forgive, forgive, forgive, serve, serve, serve. These are Jesus’ words this morning.

As many of you know, I am leaving for South Africa this week to attend Nondumiso’s wedding, but also to grieve with her and her family over her younger brother who was killed in a car accident a few weeks ago. Cahaley, my eldest daughter, will join me. On Friday, we will be a part of the African rite of marriage. On Saturday we will be a part of the Christian rite of marriage and on Sunday we will worship in the village out of the AfricanChristian rite.

South Africa, the land and her people, have influenced my faith greatly. I will be with people who forgive, forgive, forgive, and who serve, serve, serve.

What I have discovered is that service is not really about serving each other…. That’s the side effect.

What is being served is the Common Good, the Love of Christ, the spark of the Divine in each one of us, the Purpose of God, the Gift of Faith, the Christ Mirror we reflect, the Hope of the World. That’s what Jesus did when he laid down his life for his friends. He served the Christ within. When we forgive, we also serve the Christ within.

It’s our duty to serve, to surrender to a God who as the Collect reminds us this morning “is always more ready to hear than we are to pray, to give more than we either desire or deserve, and who pours out the abundance of mercy, forgiving those things of which our conscience is afraid.”

Do not be afraid. Surrender to the Living Lord, to serve the Christ in all, by forgiving and loving. Stand tall and know that we are being shaped as instruments of God’s purpose in the world. Know and trust: You are Somebody. AMEN