



27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

7 October 2007

Habbakuk 1.1-4; 2.1-4

Psalm 37

2 Timothy 1.1-14

Luke 17.5-10

27 Ordinary

7 Oct 07

When I first read this, I thought there must be some mistake.....
Did I really just hear Jesus use SLAVERY as a model for discipleship?

Slavery is one of those things I'd rather NOT talk about.
I'd like to forget all about the Africans kidnapped for work on American plantations,
I'd also like to forget the mass extermination of the native peoples
as Europeans populated the East coast and spread out all the way to the Pacific.
I'd rather not think about how my way of life, My "American dream,"
has been built on shackles and whips,
and forced marches of Indians dragging teepees and carrying babies
through frozen woods and across icy, wind-swept plains.

Because MY America is the LIBERATOR of the world, CHAMPION of freedom
.....isn't it?
Slavery and genocide don't belong in my picture of America the Beautiful.....
Land of the free-and Home of the brave-Sweet land of liberty.

Slavery—that's a part of my past I'd like to forget,
Pretend it never happened.....turn on the TV..... watch the Rockies win the pennant.

So what could Jesus mean, talking about slavery
as some sort of MODEL of his way of new life?

It's an embarrassment.
I don't want to think about the way my country owes some of its prosperity
and its power in the world to cheap or even stolen land,
And to an economic system based on the unwilling labor and suffering
of kidnap victims from Africa.

Then,..... thankfully,..... I rememberit wasn't ME...
I BOUGHT the land I live on.
And my ancestors didn't even come to the U.S. until after the Civil War,
They never had any slaves.

But what about the forced removals of the plains Indians
Who used to meet down there at the confluence of South Platte and Cherry Creek,
down there where I shop for camping equipment
and watch the Rockies win baseball games,
.....And what about the strange European diseases that wiped out whole Indian tribes,

Freeing up the land for my grandfather's farm?

But I really can't be blamed. I wasn't even born yet. It's not MY fault.

Now, I'm working really hard here trying to look good—
And as I read the news this week, I found that I'm not the only one spending a lot of time and effort trying to make myself look good.

From athletes vehemently denying they ever used drugs,
To the Senator explaining his actions in a Minnesota bathroom
To the security contractors in Iraq explaining the deaths of civilians.....
to all of the presidential candidates.....
We're ALL trying very hard and spending a lot of money to look good.

We buy sporty-looking, shiny cars, Expensive jewelry,...
We redecorate... and keep up with the latest fashions
And take exotic vacations.....We keep up on the latest news.....
And we put GREAT IMPORTANCE on our opinions of it ALL.
(this is my own special talent).
We spend a lot of time trying to justify ourselves..... to our friends
Our families, our bosses, and the whole world.

Our own Pentagon has even established an Africa Command,
to work with humanitarian agencies and diplomats,
to make..... America..... Look..... good.

Think back on your week.....
Can you recall a time when you heard someone
justifying themselves,trying to make themselves look important?
Or smart?Or attractive?Or clever?.....
Maybe it was even you.....or me.

In fact, when our ancestors justified slavery
and the destruction of America's indigenous people—
they did it by telling themselves that Europeans were better, smarter, more industrious
Than those black, red and brown people they encountered.

Tomorrow we even have a national holiday honoring the man
who brought these practices of slavery and domination
to the land he discovered in 1492,
Giving the lands to his captains as a reward,
And also giving them the women, children and men who lived on that land.

So what is a good, Swedish Lutheran immigrant girl supposed to do?
How can I possibly make myself look good,
When I think about all the history that has gone into making me who I am today?
How can I redeem this ugly past?

The truth is, we CANNOT justify ourselves—
not with our wars to bring freedom and democracy to the rest of the world
Nor with our protests of such wars.....No matter how right we think we are.
We cannot justify ourselves with patriotic parades,
Or with protests calling for an end to celebrations of Christopher Columbus.

And so we, along with the disciples, whine,.....
But, Teacher, it's toooooo hard!
We need more faith to do what you are asking of us!

And the TEACHER says to us:
"You may have only a small amount of faith,
It may only be the size of this TINY mustard seed.
But it can do GREAT THINGS.
It may be small, but you really don't need much.
What you ALREADY HAVE is sufficient.
It may be SO TINY that you can hardly grab onto it, like this mustard seed.
But it is what you have been given;
And it IS ENOUGH."

And the teacher says,
"This tiny seed of faith is ENOUGH for you to do the tasks you have been given.
It is enough to enable you to care for your neighbor.
It is enough to enable you to listen to a friend who is hurting,
To listen to the stories of those who continue to experience pain
When they recall the destruction of their people's way of life
As America moved westward across the continent."

And the teacher says,
"This microscopic seed of faith IS ENOUGH
for you to envision the HEALING of the hurts of the world.
It may be tiny, but it is ALL the faith you need,
to care for the world I have created for you,
To preserve it for your children and for your children's children.

Your tiny little faith is sufficient for you to visit the sick,
And spend time with your elders.
This TINY gift of faith is ALL YOU NEED..... to add your voice,
urging your leaders to work for peace
in Darfur, or Israel, or Afghanistan, or the Congo
or any of that whole long painful litany.....
of places you remember by name each week in your prayers."

When Jesus began the parable, he asked,
"Who among you would say to YOUR SLAVE"
The disciples are probably thinking, "Me, the slave MASTER! Cool!"

But by the end of the parable, Jesus, as he always does, turns it upside down.
And it turns out that the disciples ARE the slaves:

Jesus is pretty clear here.
Slavery does NOT make some of us more important.
It does not establish a hierarchy where I, the "civilized" white European
Have power over those who are not.....,
according to my limited experience of the world,... "civilized."
Slavery of others does NOT make ME look better.

Instead, it SHAMES me. Slavery humbles us all.
And forces us to put all our trust in God,
Rather than in our endless efforts to make ourselves LOOK good.
Because, as we all know, the snazzy car, the designer wardrobe, the buffed body...
give us only temporary feelings of worth.
Fashions quickly change and we soon find it is impossible to keep up.

All this self-justifying wears us out
And keeps us from DOING WHAT IS NEEDED:
It keeps us from what we have been commanded to do: care for the neighbor.

We,... slaves to self-justification, do not NEED to justify ourselves.
God has already done that for us.

ALL that is left to us is to obey Jesus' commands.....
To feed the hungry.....Heal the sick.....Bring comfort to those who mourn....
Give shelter to the homeless. Pray..... for thosewho suffer.

We do not justify ourselves.....even by our obedience.
We will not be judged worthy by our OPINIONS about the war in Iraq,
We will not be justified by our shock and embarrassment over slavery,
Or by protesting the Columbus Day parade.
We will not be justified even by our work to heal the wounds of slavery.
Not even by cleaning up after the Street Reach meal on Mon.
We will not be justified by visiting the sick,
By driving a hybrid car, or even by using the energy-saving light bulbs
that the Green Team will be handing you later this morning.

We do these healing acts because
Christ has FREED US from our need to justify ourselves,
From our need to be right,
Christ has freed us from slavery to our opinions.
Christ has freed us FROM self-preoccupation
FOR obedient service to our neighbor.

As Habakkuk's words of hope remind us,
"there IS STILL A VISION for the appointed time;
It speaks of the end, and does not lie."
God's vision for the healing of the world, WILL be the final word.

So, with our little faith, we do the little things,
Like taking the bus or using energy-efficient light bulbs,
Because from these little seeds of faith
that remind us that God's will for the world is justice and peace,
Healing.... will... come.

You see God's vision for the world here... in THIS place....
as you gather in this community, marked by the waters of baptism,
to celebrate the gift you have been given, your tiny little mustard seed-sized faith.

You see God's vision for the world as you feed the poor
And care for those who have been abandoned.
You see God's vision for the world as you take hold of the bread
And sip the wine.
"there IS STILL A VISION for the appointed time..."
This IS God's sure and certain promise.