

TEXT: Luke 17:1-10
THEME: You have all the faith you need
SUBJECT: Discernment
TITLE: *Sensus Fidei*

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
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The International Theological Commission formed following Vatican II, published a little book in 2014 titled, *Sensus Fidei: In the Life of the Church*. *Sensus Fidei* (a sense of the faith) is a sort of spiritual instinct that enables the believer to judge spontaneously whether a particular teaching or practice is or is not in conformity with the Gospel and with apostolic faith.

The apostle Paul's letters are attempts to instruct individuals and congregations, whose sense of the faith is frequently at odds with Paul's. Augustine struggled mightily with Manichaeans and Donatists, groups whose sense of the faith differed from Augustine's. Luther's sense of the faith was at odds with Rome's. Today the church is torn asunder by groups holding different senses of the faith related to matters of human sexuality.

Sensus fidei, this spiritual instinct, is formed through prayer, the development of a sacramental imagination, prophetic witness (especially in service to the poor), reflection upon one's faith (being able to give a reason for the faith we hold), participation in the life of the church, and engaging in the ongoing conversation between the history and tradition of the church and the life of the world in which we live. This spiritual instinct is only as good as the training we receive in the faith of the church.

Today's gospel reading requires the healthy exercise of a finely developed spiritual instinct. Jesus is instructing his disciples in the duties of discipleship. He wants them to exhibit mutual support and forgiveness, to realize the power of faith, and to be servants who do what is right without thought of reward.

Causes of stumbling are inevitable, Jesus says. But it would be better for us to be drowned than to be allowed to continue to trip up the little ones, those new to the faith. How long do you think it would be before no one is left? Who do you think would be the last person standing? My money is on Nora Bolling.

If someone sins against you seven times in one day . . . perhaps they should be drowned. "You must forgive," is not an easy word for anyone to hear. Within an abusive relationship, the intimacy of repentance and forgiveness can become a crucial step in a violent pattern. Exhorting forgiveness in such a context tempts the victim to forget or deny she is a child of God worthy of love and respect, and may even tempt her to violence, volunteering to hang the millstone around the offender's neck.

One can sympathize with the disciple's cry for more faith. Jesus responds, If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to the mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey you.

James Wood, a prominent literary critic and novelist, grew up in a charismatic Christian community. One of the kindest and gentlest people in the congregation died of cancer, despite the enormous prayerful effort to save her. Wood concluded that faith might move mountains, but in an invisible mountain-range.

The notion that if you fervently believe the impossible, God will reward your faith by making what you believe a reality is more akin to magical thinking than to faith. Magical thinking is the inevitable end of reading metaphors literally. If what you fervently believe does not become a reality, then your faith must have been weak. In other words, it's your fault. Such logic is as deadly as the most aggressive forms of cancer.

The story about masters and slaves has also been used in harmful ways. Those who supported slavery in the USA pointed to such references in the Bible as evidence that slavery was divinely sanctioned. Jesus appears to accept slavery as at least an unavoidable social arrangement.

At the beginning of this saying, Jesus invites the hearer to identify with the master: "Who among you would say to your slave . . .?" By the end of the story, Jesus identifies his hearers with the slave: "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have only done what we ought to have done!'" This twist of identification pulls Jesus' hearers up short, undoes their pretensions, and reminds them that we cannot earn God's favor.

Christian communities have a long history of using the Bible in ways that cause suffering. A well trained sense of the faith is necessary to discern what is life-giving, to judge whether a particular teaching or practice is in conformity with the Gospel, with the truth of the whole Gospel, and not a perversion of it. For that we need all the training we can get in the *sensus fidelium*, the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.