

“Increase Our Faith!”

In the name of him who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light, dear friends in Christ: This morning's reading from Luke's Gospel made me think of the film *The Karate Kid* – the original one with Pat Morita playing the part of Mr. Miyagi. How many of you will admit to having seen it? All right, to fill in those who aren't familiar with it and to refresh the memory of those who are, the story goes that the new kid in school is constantly getting beat up by a gang of boys who are all enrolled in an expensive Karate school. Tired of getting pounded all the time, he applies to the handyman who maintains the apartments where he lives for help. He's a Japanese fellow who learned the martial art in his homeland according to tried and true traditional methods. He agrees to teach the boy karate; but when the kid shows up expecting to learn how to punch and kick and what not, the fellow puts him to work doing various laborious chores for him. First it's wax the car. The guy's got ten or so classics from the late '30s and early '40s. He has the kid wash one of them, and shows him exactly how he wants the wax applied and buffed off. Wax on, wax off. It's a lot of work to put a hard wax shine on a car. The kid slaves over it for hours. He's not used to manual labor. By the time he's done, he's pretty much worn out: sore arms, bathed in sweat. Still, he's fairly proud of his achievement. The car looks good. He goes to report to his teacher, expecting to be suitably praised and sent home for the rest of the day. The old guy comes out, takes one look and says, "Very good. Now wash and wax the other nine cars." The kid's heart sinks.

A few days later it's paint the fence. The teacher has a large, lovely Japanese garden in his back yard surrounded by a high wooden fence. Its construction is solid: vertical boards with no space between them. He shows the boy exactly how he wants the fence painted and sets him to work. It takes all day. By the time he's done, it's getting dark. He's hungry and worn out. But again, he's pretty pleased with himself. With a certain amount of pride he wearily tells his teacher, "Whew ... all finished". The man asks, "Both sides?" Deflation follows. Next scene it's full dark, the crickets are chirping, and the boy is painting the outside of the fence. He's got a *long way to go*.

And that's what we see in today's Gospel. The disciples have been with Jesus for over two years now. At first it was hard trying to keep up with their master – his teachings were so strange to their ears, his methods so radically different than what they'd come to expect from a religious teacher. But by now, they're getting used to him. They're more comfortable with this discipleship thing. They've begun to absorb some of Jesus' lessons for them. His words are taking root. They think they're making real progress, moving forward on the path toward spiritual wisdom and true holiness of heart and mind.

And then Jesus drops today's verbal bombs on them, effectively telling them that not only have they not made much progress on the course he's laid out for them, they haven't even got started. Until this point they've thought of their discipleship as pretty much an individual thing. "I'm responsible only for myself. It's me I've got to watch out for, learning to turn from sin in all its forms, repenting, and walking the path of faith in Jesus. This is about my personal relationship with him." Why, they thought about discipleship the same way most modern American Christians think about it: purely an individualistic thing: just me and Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't know anything about that. He certainly didn't teach anything like that. No, the call of Christ goes out to individuals, but the call is to become one with him, to be united

in his body, and thus to be joined to all the others who have likewise been called to faith and who confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. There are no individual Christians who stand alone. There is only the body of Christ, his church, in which we are being knit together in community, an organic whole; each one of us working together for the good of the whole body. The person who says, "I'm a Christian all by myself and I don't need the church" is demonstrating that he hasn't got the foggiest notion what being a Christian means. It's never just "me and Jesus". It's always Jesus in and with *us* – *all of us* – all of us loving and caring for each other even as Christ loves and cares for us.

Thus Christian discipleship means that we recognize our responsibilities and obligations to each other. It also means that we must be mindful of how our actions (or lack of them) may harm others, causing those around us to stumble into sin or unbelief. This is where today's lesson begins, with the matter of tempting others to sin. Jesus says that temptations are sure to come – that's the way this fallen world is – but you don't want to be the one by whom temptations come. How can you do this? First, and most obviously, when you flat out encourage someone to do something they ought not to do. It might be a challenge or a dare – especially among the younger set. It might be a proposal to commit sexual sin: fornication or adultery. It might be an offer to enter into an illicit business deal by which money is made dishonestly, taxes are unlawfully avoided, or insurance companies are defrauded. Maybe it's as simple as pushing a drink on someone's who's already had too many. These and other direct temptations to sin are dangerous. They have the capacity to destroy souls – souls for which Christ died. They are nothing less than the work of the devil; he's the original tempter. And for him is reserved the lowest place in hell. You don't want to be about doing the devil's work of tempting others to sin.

And not all the tempting you do is quite so obvious. You can lead others to sin indirectly. A good example is a woman who chooses immodest apparel to wear, thus inflaming her male colleagues to lust after her. Another is parents who don't exercise proper discernment concerning what programs and films their children are allowed to watch or video games they may play. Perhaps the most common form of indirect temptations we present to others are the examples we give them with our own lives. This is especially true of those in positions of responsibility, whom other people look up to for guidance: parents, teachers, community leaders, politicians, celebrities, and yes, I suppose, pastors. When such people treat their own sins lightly, they are effectively telling everyone else, "It's okay." Be it the politician who reneges on his campaign promises or who abandons his family and runs off with his secretary, the celebrity with the foul mouth or loose morals, or the parent who tells the children how important it is to keep the commandments but leaps at every flimsy excuse to violate the third (and in case you're wondering, that's the one about keeping the Sabbath), we can do untold damage to others and bring them to spiritual ruin. Jesus pronounces woe to those who tempt others to sin. It's a word of gravest condemnation. Better to be dead, he says – to have a millstone tied around your neck and be dropped in the sea – than to tempt someone else to sin. You must be mindful of how your words and actions may be doing just that. And where there's a problem, you need to repent.

The lesson doesn't end there, however. Not only is it necessary to keep yourself from tempting others to sin, you have an obligation to the brother or sister in Christ who has fallen into sin regardless of where the temptation came from. Jesus says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him." That is, if you know that someone has done or is doing something that violates a command of God, you have the loving duty to lay that sin before them and call them to repent. To fail to do so would be like knowing your neighbor's house is on fire, and failing to attempt to wake them and get them out before the flames consume them. And that's just it: sin deceives.

Its short seasoned pleasure seduces and numbs the heart. It leads people into a sort of spiritual sleep – sleep from which they may never wake and thus be destroyed eternally if they are not alerted and corrected by the Word of God's Law. And yes, I know this is not an easy task. The backlash you're likely to get when you do what must be done for the sake of love is a fearful thing. "Who are you to judge me? Why don't you mind your own business?" The answers are simple: "*You are my business.* As a fellow believer, I must judge you and your actions. Christ commands me to. His love compels me. And where you come up short, he commands me to tell you so that you'll repent and not be lost forever." Friends, we are each others' keepers. If you know someone is committing spiritual suicide, you ought to try to stop them. If you don't, how can you claim to be a disciple of Jesus? How can you claim the love of Christ dwells within you?

Have you noticed that this thing we call discipleship is getting a lot harder? And we're still not done with today's lesson. Next Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you seven times in the day, and seven times he turns to you saying, 'I repent', you must forgive him." Now we're not talking about the sins someone is doing that don't directly affect you; but the ones that hurt you the most – in which you are the victim. You've been betrayed. This person has been telling lies about you to destroy your reputation, or they've been stealing from you, maybe even harming you physically. And they keep doing it over and over again, each time coming back and telling you, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I repent. Please forgive me." The first time it was hard enough to forgive; but the second or third time it's a lot tougher. You want to say, "I don't believe you. I don't trust you. I'm not going to risk getting hurt again. I will not forgive you!" Friends, just imagine where you'd be if Jesus took that attitude toward you. How many times have you stood here and confessed the same sins week after week after week? Seven times? Seventy times? Seven times seventy? To be a disciple of Christ means learning to be like Christ: to forgive those who sin against you as freely and completely *and as often* as Jesus forgives you.

When the disciples heard these three short lessons on Christian's most basic duties – not tempting others to sin, rebuking those who have fallen into sin, and freely forgiving those who sin against you and repent no matter how many times they do it – together they hit them like a ton of bricks. They had imagined that they were making real progress, that they deserved an "atta-boy" for all their improvement to date. They learned that compared to the job in front of them, they hadn't come any way at all.

But now here's what's key: rather than give up in despair, rather than throw in the towel and say, "Forget it, this is just too hard", they did the right thing. They turned to Jesus and prayed, "Increase our faith". They knew that what it took to be fit and proper disciple did not lie within them. They knew they could never generate within themselves the kind of faith required to follow Jesus to such great lengths. So they asked Jesus to supply them with what they lacked. Responding to their prayer, Jesus told them what even a little faith – as small as a mustard seed – could do. Amazing, supernatural things, beyond the ability of any human.

And so we ought to pray, "Lord, increase our faith! Give to us faith even as small as a mustard seed so that we may truly be your disciples, never for a moment thinking that the life of a Christian is some kind of isolated, private, or personal thing; but always remembering that we are called into the body of believers who are to love and care for each other." And as we pray for more faith, let us remember that true faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Like a mustard seed planted in fertile soil, it grows and increases when Jesus gives us his Spirit – the Spirit who comes in God's Word of Law that convicts us of our sins and drives us to confess them so that we may hear and be strengthened in faith by the words of absolution: "For Christ's

sake, who gave himself for your sins, I forgive you!” The same Holy Spirit comes to increase our faith when we hear God’s Word taught, when we meditate upon it, when we sing it in psalms and hymns, and most importantly when we receive the Word made flesh: Jesus’ body and blood given in Holy Communion – Holy Communion that unites us with Jesus and through him with one another, in one body.

Therefore, let us pray: Father in heaven, increase our faith, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, who loved us and gave himself for us. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!