

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, October 3, 2010
 Nineteenth Sunday of Pentecost – Proper 22-C
 Luke 17:5-10; *Increase our Faith*
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday evening we had a great potluck dinner with the confirmands and their families and sponsors to kick off the new year. We do have wonderful cooks in this congregation! After dinner it was time to introduce the group to the confirmation program – expectations, the calendar, all the details – to start the conversation about the covenant we were making for the, the community we were building, I had some balls of yarn – I asked them to take hold of the yarn and then toss the ball across the room – each person was to hold onto the string and pass it along. There was a great deal of noise and laughter down in Robinson Hall as this happened and I also noticed that some of the participants held on to the ball of yarn, thinking about where to toss it next. I said – don't overthink it – just toss it! When everyone had some yarn in hand, I asked them to just lift it up – it was an interesting image – like a large spider web – but it was an image of the covenant we were making, the community we were building – everyone a part of it – everyone responsible to hold on to their piece so the whole would remain intact. I observed that this tangled mess was perhaps a great symbol of the church – of our faith – a tangled mess sometimes, but always interdependent, always strengthened by everyone's participation.

Don't overthink – hang on.

Don't we all at one time or another feel overwhelmed, even fearful sometimes. Don't we all at one time or another feel like, there's so much to do – I can't keep up with it all! Or don't we watch or listen to the news and sometimes get discouraged. Sad. Angry.

There are families among us who struggle with illness, sadness, who mourn loved ones – sometimes one problem after another it seems – and they ask, when do we get a break! How much more can we take? And then comes the question – what does God want from me?

Overwhelming discouragement can shut us down, can't it – there's so much need that whatever I do just doesn't make a difference – why should I try?

I'm so very troubled with the epidemic of teenage suicide that seems to be taking hold – the pain that these young people is feeling must be so desperate, the aloneness that they feel must be so horrible – that they just don't see another way out than ending the pain by taking their own life. There's no ball of yarn for them to hang on to – there's not even a tangled mess that they feel part of.

Overwhelming emotions for many of us these days – what do we do with them!

Jesus' disciples experienced these same feelings – had the same questions. In our gospel reading we heard them cry out to Jesus a cry that maybe we've all made at one time or another – they felt that what they faced in life, let alone what they faced as ones who wanted to follow Jesus, was too much for them, too much for their small faith to handle and they cry out, “Lord, increase our faith!”

“Lord, help us to believe enough so that we can do what it is that you have commanded us to do – help us trust enough so that we can live as you say we should be living. Lord, take away our fear.”

The question I often ask, “Lord, what do you want from me!”

First of all, both of these are faith statements! The fact that we are asking for more belief, trust, direction – that’s a faith statement! Often the confirmands seem a little relieved when we’re talking about faith and they share their doubts, their questions – and I tell them those are faith statements! If we didn’t have questions, doubts – all that – if we didn’t ask God, what is it that you want from me – under those questions, doubts, is a belief that there is a God who will listen, who cares, who loves us, even at those times when we don’t love ourselves very much.

So, what does Jesus say to his disciples? It’s not a soft answer at all – he says, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea! And it would obey you.”

A strange answer, isn’t it. Jesus doesn’t lay his hands on them and pray and give them more faith – he doesn’t snap his fingers and grant them a double dose of his spirit and his faith.

Maybe we’re asking the wrong question.

I wonder if sometimes we’re overthinking our faith, especially when we’re feeling overwhelmed.

Philip Cary is a professor at Eastern University and wrote an article for Christian Century entitled “No Secret Plan: why you don’t have to “find” God’s will in your life. He says, “This challenge to find God’s will for your life turns out to be a great sense of anxiety for the students I encounter. They’re young which means they have a lot of life ahead of them and a lot of big decisions to make. When they hear about the importance of finding God’s will for your life, they conclude it’s not enough to learn how to make good decisions about what career to pursue or whom to marry. On top of that, you have to figure out whether this is exactly the decision God has in mind for you. And, how do you figure that out?”

He goes on to say, “If you want to know God’s will for your life, here it is: “He has told you, O Israel, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8). The will of God for your life is justice, kindness, and a humble walk with him. Nothing more is required of you.” Professor Cary acknowledges that it takes a lifetime to learn and live out this teaching – but it will lead to a lifetime that honors God’s name. God’s will is clear – what we have to learn is how our decisions relate to God’s will.

And another passage with the same basic message: most important of all is what Jesus has taught us: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Here’s the challenge to all of us: if we obey these commandments, we are doing all that God requires of us. That’s the will of God, isn’t it. And it’s pretty clear and direct. The lifelong challenge for us and for those original disciples is this: how does my faith inform how I make decisions, how I relate to other people, how I take my place in this community of believers.

Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God. Love God. Love neighbor. As we love ourselves. That's how we are called to live – and that's how we live within the tangled mess of our faith.

And maybe that's what Jesus was telling his disciples – and us – don't overthink – it's really very simple – at least the instruction is – living it out is the challenge as disciples through the ages have found.

Maybe what the message really is is this: work with the faith that you already have. Nurture those seeds of faith planted in each of us at one time in our lives – take a breath - go back to the basics – keep it simple.

The exercise with the yarn at the confirmation dinner made the point that we're all connected, simply because we're all children of God, entitled to respect and dignity just because of that.

And haven't we all had a lesson in tragic consequences when this respect and treatment of each other doesn't happen – the life and death of Tyler Clementi this week. Partly because Rutgers isn't very far from us, this story has come so very close to home for many of you – many people have spoken this week about knowing students there – and all week I've been remembering about a young man from Middlebury who ended his own life in his own home – and about another young man whose father brought him to my house on evening to talk – he'd been talking about suicide all day and thankfully, his father heard it and reached out – I'm happy to say he's healthy today, working at a job he loves, surrounded by friends and family who support him. Most of us don't understand the desperate pain that leads to suicide – a permanent end to a temporary problem is how someone described it – but the loss of hope, the despair, the fear these young men must have felt – the feeling of being so alone – it's almost beyond comprehension to us.

Tyler's death, the events leading to it, are an profoundly, incredibly, deeply sad event for all of us, but one, I hope, that will force us to wake up and realize how connected we all are. How we never know what's going on with someone sitting next to us, how important it is for us to reach out in compassion with everyone we meet, how important it is for us to live out the commandment to love kindness – to love our neighbor as ourselves. Tyler's family is quoted as saying, "Our hope is that our family's personal tragedy will serve as a call for compassion, empathy, and human dignity."

How do we individually and as a congregation respond to that call?

Do justice. Love kindness. Love one another. Work with the faith that you already have – it's all pretty simple, isn't it. Take a breath. Think before you speak or act. Treat each other as you would want to be treated. And reach out to your neighbor in love and compassion – you just might save a life.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday – an observance begun in 1936 in Presbyterian churches in the United States and overseas – extended in 1940 to include all denominations – a truly ecumenical, worldwide celebration. We join with our brothers and sisters in Christ everywhere, all around the world – and our differences fall away as we gather at the table to receive the gift of new life that Christ has brought to us. Because that's what matters – that we have received the gift of new life and we're called to share that gift with everyone we meet. What matters is that we are all children of God – bound together, all invited, all welcome at this table.

The disciples cried out to Jesus – Lord, help us to believe enough so that we can do what it is that you have commanded us to do. Help us trust enough so we can live as

you say we should be living. Jesus told them, tells us, that if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, all things are possible. And Jesus tells us how to make that happen: it's too simple, perhaps: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God as we love one another as Jesus has loved us.

And so let us reach out and hold on to one another as that group on Sunday night held on to that yarn and may we create a new community of love and respect for everyone we meet. It may be a tangled mess – but Christ is at the center with us – and we need nothing else. Amen.