

This gospel (Luke 17:1-10) is not about why bad things happen to good people. That is Habakkuk's brief with God. This gospel is about the inevitability of bad things happening. When, not if, bad things happen, the perpetrator is to be confronted and held accountable.

Jesus is rather emphatic about this and quite harsh: it is better for the offender to be drowned than to harm the innocent. This is a far cry from hating the sin and loving the sinner. By confronting the offender, you offer him a chance to repent, to have a change of heart.

While bad things happening is inevitable, repentance is not. One can be shameless. On the other hand, one can have a change of heart and do the bad thing again. According to Jesus, it is possible to be a repeat offender at least seven times in one day.

Talk about heartache. How many times can you have a change of heart without having a heart attack? If you are the offended party, how many times can you let go of injury in one day without suffering serious heartburn?

Maybe Jesus is using hyperbole to make a point. The disciples don't like the point; they ask Jesus to increase their faith. Their cry for mercy is met with what sounds like judgment, condemnation even.

*If* you had faith, says Jesus, the size of grain of mustard, you could do the impossible. Let's be honest, replanting a mulberry tree in the sea is child's play compared to forgiving a repeat offender seven times in one day.

The Greek language has two types of "if" clauses: those which express a condition contrary to fact (*if* I were Superman), and those which express a condition according to fact (*if* good people do bad things).

Fred Craddock tells us that when Jesus says, "*If* you have faith the size of a mustard seed," he is expressing a condition according to fact: you do have such faith. Jesus' response is not a reprimand for an absence of faith, but an affirmation of the faith the disciples have and an invitation to live out the full possibilities of that faith.

The disciples were not convinced. Jesus gets tough: it is their duty, as disciples, to forgive. They have no choice. Furthermore, they are not to expect anything in return: no appreciation, no praise, no time off.

Harsh? Yes! Especially if you are an innocent victim of a repeat offender. Do we not have a responsibility to evaluate the sincerity of the offender's change of heart? Seven times in one day cannot possibly indicate real repentance. Faith cannot be so gullible that it abandons reason!

Yet, forgiveness is not possible apart from faith, and life together is not possible apart from forgiveness. Jesus warns us that vengeance belongs to God. While Jesus may have thought it better for one who harms an innocent to be drowned, he forgave his Roman executioners.

Jesus expects his disciples to do what he commands, to act like he acted. Is it little wonder that G. K. Chesterton observed: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.”

There have been notable exceptions. The Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pa. comes to mind. A gunman shot ten girls in a one room school house, killing five before killing himself.

The Amish community responded as Jesus commanded. A father of one of the murdered girls said, “He (the shooter) had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he’s standing before a just God.” This father must have had faith the size of a basketball.

The Amish visited and comforted the shooter’s widow, parents and parents-in-law. One Amish man held the shooter’s sobbing father in his arms for an hour to comfort him.

The shooter’s wife, Marie, wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors: “Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you’ve given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world.”

Some were quick to criticize the Amish for their quick forgiveness. Letting grudges go is deeply rooted in Amish culture, which remembers the forgiveness of Jesus himself. *The willingness to forego vengeance does not undo the tragedy or pardon the wrong, but rather constitutes a first step toward a future that is more hopeful.*

Faith the size of a grain of mustard keeps open the possibility of a more hopeful future.