I have great respect for those who created the Revised Common Lectionary which is where our readings come from each Sunday. Through the RCL, we essentially cover all the main theological topics in the course of the year. The weakness of the RCL, however, is that we only get snippets of the Bible – in this case – a snippet from Lamentations, from 2 Timothy and from the Gospel. If we’re not careful we can take passages out of context. This week, we are looking at a passage in which the disciples ask Jesus to give them more faith. But to understand where this question comes from, I think we need to all hear the verses that immediately precede this passage in Luke.

Here are verses 1-5

Jesus[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+17%3A1-10&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-25645a)] said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! **2**It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. **3**Be on your guard! If another disciple[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+17%3A1-10&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-25647b)] sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. **4**And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

The disciples ask for more faith to live as Christ tells them to. One of the primary things they seek more faith to be able to do is to forgive their brothers and sisters who keep doing bad things to them. Jesus’s response is essentially that they already have enough faith to do this. If we have just enough faith to focus on the character of God – who forgives us over and over again – then we have enough faith to model that forgiveness. The key is to focus on who God is and how much God loves and puts up with us, rather than to focus on the faith we think we lack. God has already given each of us enough faith if we just use that faith and quit whining for God to give us more.

Simon Wiesenthal, a Jewish man who survived imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, tells a story of his struggle to forgive in the book The Sunflower. One day he is taken from his work detail at the concentration camp to the bedside of a dying Nazi. That Nazi confesses to Simon all the atrocities he has committed against Jews in the concentration camp and asks for his forgiveness. Faced with the choice between compassion and justice, Wiesenthal said nothing. He left the room without either forgiving the man or further chastising him. Yet the memory of that moment in the room seemed to haunt Wiesenthal for the rest of his life so much so that after the war he looked up the German man’s mother. He visited her and listened as she reminisced about what a good boy he was and how much she had loved him. He decided to leave without telling her the truth about her son.[[1]](#endnote-1) Years later he was still haunted by this experience, wrote about it and collected thoughts from religious leaders of all faiths on forgiveness in his book.

I can’t say that had I been Wiesenthal that I would have been able to forgive that Nazi either, especially since Wiesenthal was still a prisoner in the concentration camp, daily seeing and experiencing the atrocities of that Nazi and others like him. Every day, over and over, he saw the results of what that young man and his philosophy did to others. Were I in Wiesnthal’s place, I like the disciples, would cry out that I needed more faith to forgive a man like that Nazi. But I can say that God forgave that Nazi. And I can say that God would tell me that I already have enough faith to forgive, that I only need to look at God’s own character of forgiveness and follow that model.

Wiesenthal suffered throughout his life as he struggled with whether he did the right thing in walking away from that Nazi asking for forgiveness. He received a bit of healing when he did not destroy the man’s mother’s memories of her son. But, obviously, he still faced a little piece of death within himself because he didn’t forgive.

That happens to us, too. When we don’t forgive as God forgives, a part of us dies. Jesus used the illustration of the mulberry tree in our Gospel today. He said that if we have the faith of a mustard seed – a tiny little bit of faith – than we can say to the mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea and it would happen. In the days of Jesus, the mulberry tree had special significance. It was known as “the casket tree.” The wood from that tree was always what was used in building caskets. The moment Jesus brought up the mulberry tree, his listeners would have thought about death. Jesus’s point is that when we fail to forgive a part of us dies.[[2]](#endnote-2) If we use the faith God has given us – just that little bit of faith – to forgive as God forgives then we tell that death force to go jump in the lake. And it does. We defeat that spiritual death in our lives.

God forgives us every time we ask for it. No matter how many times we sin, God forgives us. And God calls us to do the same. Although forgiveness is hard for us, God has already given us all the faith we need to be able to do it. Faith isn’t about size, it’s about acting as Christ in the world. All of us have faith the size of a mustard seed. All of us can forgive.

1. Simon Wiesenthal, The Sunflower, (1969 Opera Mundi Paris), pp 1-98 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Steve Trexler, “The Mulberry Tree: The Casket Tree”, Charisma magazine, accessed at <https://www.charismamag.com/spirit/spiritual-growth/25415-mulberry-the-casket-tree?fbclid=IwAR0wzIsDSz0rMHk13LPlmvus3HA_x_DfMLzfoAdz5lAMjEFv07mivNudcIE> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)