

Increase Our Faith

Luke 17:5-10

Who among us does not want more faith? Most of us are not surprised at the disciples' plea that Jesus give them more. There is a guilt-ridden part of us that is not particularly surprised at Jesus' scoffing reply. "If you had even this much faith," he tells them, pinching his thumb and forefinger together, "you would be able to do anything you wished." We hang our heads with the apostles, suffering the scold we know we deserve. If there is one thing we have come to expect from Jesus, it is the constant reminder of how short we fall. As my friend Rev. Shirley Martinson says, "we want a watermelon sized faith."

However, somewhere along the way we have grown to expect a steady dose of condemnation from Scripture; more often than not, we hear Jesus' words to the disciples—and therefore, to us—as shaming and angry words. It is surprising, in fact, how often we people of faith, who worship regularly, assume a punitive tone when reading and hearing biblical texts. This assumed tone repels many of us even as we worship on this October morning. Some of us bring the scars of a Bible that has been misused on us. Others of us have always assumed Christianity is all about guilt. These perceptions stand as barriers between us and the God who loves us.

We know indeed, great things have been done by people who believed in a dream and, in faith, pursued it with everything in them. We think of the watermelon size faith of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, grounded in the churches: nonviolent protesters confronting armed police, dogs, water hoses, and crowds threatening violence in defense of racial segregation; or the watermelon sized faith of Bishop Desmond Tutu confronting the full power of the state in opposing the terrible racism of apartheid; of the watermelon sized faith

of crowds streaming out of their churches, holding candles, singing hymns, in Leipzig and Dresden and East Berlin, in defiance of the Communist government as the regime was tottering and falling. Unlikely but profound change happened because people had faith. The landscape of America and South Africa and Europe was altered, fundamentally. But didn't they have watermelon size faith rather than this mustard seed faith of ours?

If we are not careful, Jesus' mustard seed story can lend itself to a favorite motif of American culture: "Believe in your goals deeply enough, work toward your goals hard enough, and you will accomplish them." Jesus was not talking about the prosperity gospel, that our awesome God wants everyone to be successful, wealthy, healthy, that God can be recruited to the project of helping us accomplish all our goals. This may sound good, but that is not the reality of our faith! All of us have prayed and know very faithful people who have prayed and their prayers were not answered in the way hoped. We all also know faithful men and women and children for whom things are not going well. Earnest and believing prayer has seemed futile for the twenty-five-year employee whose corporation has downsized him out; for the woman whose lump was malignant; for the boy whose spot on the varsity was supposed to resolve old feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and unpopularity. There are needy, disappointed, discouraged, grieving people in worship this morning and every Sunday. If we listen to some we think there is something wrong with us—we did not pray hard enough, we do not have enough faith. We are not worthy. But let's look at this scripture to see if that is what it is really teaching.

We would do well to explore a whole range of tones when reading the words of Scripture. What if Jesus is not scolding the apostles at all? What if he is not clucking his tongue and shaking his head over their lack of faith, but speaking

these words in a voice of encouragement and love, as one who would give up his life for his friends? For us?

If we listen again to this exchange with these new ears, we hear Jesus answer the disciples with kindness, and maybe even a bit of a smile. "Why, you do not need more faith," he says. "Even this much faith (his thumb and forefinger pinching together again) is enough!" If we hear Jesus speak with the voice of love, we hear him telling the apostles that, in fact, they already have enough faith to do whatever is required of them.

Given the verses that precede this scripture (vv. 1-4), we can understand why the disciples might ask for more faith. Jesus has just told them that discipleship is more demanding than they imagined. Discipleship makes us accountable to one another. In fact, drowning in the sea would be preferable to causing a brother or sister to go astray. If we are wronged, Jesus insisted, they and we are to draw from a bottomless well of forgiveness. It is no wonder that the disciples cry out, "Increase our faith!" They were not sure they were up to this, but Jesus changed the question from "How much faith is enough?" to "What is faith for?" He told them, through image and story, "You already have the faith you need. Now fulfill its purpose: live it."

After Jesus uses the example of a mustard seed to say that faith is not quantifiable, he told this parable about a master and a slave to show them what he meant. In our contemporary Western world, it is difficult for us to hear Jesus speak this way about slavery. If, however, we consider the story in the context of a society in which some people work as servants for a period of years before being freed, are they were like domestic employees or farm hands or shepherds, we see that Jesus was describing a relationship. Does the servant deserve congratulations simply for doing his job, he asked? Should she be rewarded for doing what is expected? "Of course not!" What Jesus described is a relationship between master

and servant (employer and employee) that is marked by mutual accountability and expectation. The master expects the servants to perform their duties, and the servants, in turn, expect that when their work is done, they will receive nourishment and rest and protection.

To understand faith in this way, then, is to understand it as a way of life. Those who serve God do so with a sense of duty and delight, living a life according to God's commandments. We live a life of obedience because, as the psalmist sings, "Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them" (119:129). We serve God and one another, not for the bonus points, and not only because God expects it, but because we know that God has shown us the way to abundant life.

In other words, to question whether one has enough faith is to miss the mark. The issue at stake is how we live together. How do we keep from leading one another into the valley of death? How do we manage to keep forgiving one another, over and over again? We do it not because we have a superhuman reservoir of faith stored up, but because God gives us what we need to flourish abundantly in faithful community. In the economy of faith, we who serve depend on a benevolent master who not only expects us to obey but gives us all that is required to do so.

This view of faith saves the church and us Christians from all sorts of missteps. In the church, faith is less about personal strength and more about mutual tolerance, as we keep on learning that we are all in this together. A community that lives out this sort of faith is not afraid to ask questions or express doubts or show weakness; nor is it afraid to value mercy over fairness, or to forgive one another's failings even when patience wears thin.

In the church, faith is not stockpiled in a storehouse for the working of spiritual wonders, but is lived out as obedience to a just and loving God. Trusting in the

One with whom we are in relationship, we relinquish any illusions of self-reliance, acknowledging that faith cannot be measured, only enacted.

In the church, we discover more than we dared to imagine about divine blessing. As we walk in God's ways together, we find that the God who expects much from us also promises much and that—wonder of wonders—the rightful master of us all came first and foremost, "not to be served but to serve" us (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). **Kimberly Bracken Long**

The key here is to remember who is telling this story and to compare his own behavior with the conventional, culturally reinforced behavior of the master in this story. "I am among you as one who serves," he said (Luke 22:27). He did not call them "worthless slaves;" he called them his friends. In the most astonishing demonstration of servanthood, he knelt before each one of them on the night of his arrest and washed their feet.

Increase our faith. Try that as a demonstration of faith: a tiny faith that aspires to great things, but that knows how to kneel and serve. **John M. Buchanan**

You and I don't need a watermelon size faith, we need the love one another, forgive one another, encourage one another, and we faith to the master of our faith!

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