

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Sunday October 6, 2019 Proper 22C  
Text: Luke 17: 5-10  
Theme: Small Things that Matter.

"Increase our faith!"

That is what the disciples ask of Jesus.

Why did they need more faith? Well, they had actually been listening to Jesus and what he expected of his disciples and they were not sure they could live up to his standards without an additional infusion of faith.

Jesus had told them that they were responsible for little ones and keeping them from stumbling. Jesus wanted them to look out for the most vulnerable and weakest of the community.

Jesus had also told them that they must be endlessly ready to forgive whoever offends them. Basically, don't ever stop forgiving people.

They were crying out for more faith because Jesus was asking them to live in a way that many would see as socially foolish. Jesus was always challenging the primal instinct to protect and defend oneself. Revenge and retaliation are the accepted ways of our world and have been for some time now. Jesus' new way of deference and forgiveness may be hallmarks of the kingdom of God but they cut against the grain and seem unrealistic in the world most people live in.

No wonder the disciples wanted Jesus to give them more faith.

In fact, that may be why we are here today to get some more faith. To have our faith strengthened stirred up a bit. Like the disciples we tend to think that more is better. More faith would be good.

However, Jesus doesn't seem to see it this way. He counters with one of his custom word pictures telling them that if they had the faith the size of a mustard seed, they could uproot trees and plant them in unlikely places.

Jesus agrees that they need faith but he doesn't seem to agree that the quantity of faith is all that important.

What the disciples need, is to be reminded about what faith is and assured that they have all the faith that they need to be God's people in the world.

**Faith results from people opening up and responding to God's movement towards them.** Faith is simply responding to God's initiative. Remember God

first loved us, that is the good news of the Gospel. When we open up to God's action in our lives, we allow ourselves to begin to cooperate with the divine energy and bring about the world that God envisions. **Faith is not about our ability to do things on our own, it is about joining our efforts with God's intentions and activity. Faith is not something we do alone it is something we do in partnership with God.**

Earlier, Jesus had told the disciples a parable about the Kingdom of God. "It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." [Luke 13]. We just read this recently when we dedicated the courtyard.

Once the seed is sown in the garden, in the human heart where God can nurture it – it grows into a tree of welcome. All people can nest in its branches. This is what Jesus is saying to them. By faith they can make a home for humanity, the weak can be sheltered and protected, the strong and obnoxious can be forgiven and welcomed too without violence and rejection that is the usual response. The followers of Jesus can be a tree of welcome and their faith, even though the size of a mustard seed, is more than enough for the task. They have all they need.

That is really the point, you have all the faith that you need. Even just a little bit of faith is enough. Do you have faith, just a little bit? Then it's enough to cooperate with God and bring the kingdom of God near in whatever small way is possible. You don't need mountains of faith, but just a little bit of faith can move what seems like a mountain.

Have you noticed God's preference for small things? Gideon, the weakest guy in the land of Israel, is called by God to defeat an occupying army. His 300 men defeat thousands on the other side. When Samuel meets the strong, handsome sons of Jesse, God chooses the youngest, David, over his brothers. And God chooses a young, poor woman—living in Israel under the Roman occupation—as the one who would give birth to Jesus. God is into using what little we have and performing great works.

This is of course what the parable of Jesus is trying to say. The deep and strong roots of a mulberry tree can be uprooted and replanted in a place where it has never been and where no one would ever expect it to grow. It is a word picture of how faith can make what seems an impossible thing possible. With God nothing will be impossible (Luke 1:37)

Just like this, human relationships in our world have always been characterized by the strong trampling on the weak, and the first aggression calling forth another more violent aggression in an unending cycle of violence. We tend to see this as just the way things are, the ugly underbelly of human history. But the eyes of faith allow for something new to happen.

How can we understand this more personally? There is a story in the Mark's gospel that parallels this one. Jesus has had compassion on the crowds and has taught them many things but now it is getting late. A situation is arising that the disciples do not know how to meet. They say to Jesus, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send the people away so they may go into the surrounding villages and buy something for themselves to eat." Jesus sharply responds, "You give them something to eat."

Of course, like ourselves the disciples are quick to focus on what they lack. "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat." Their vision of feeding the people requires more than they have. The situation seems impossible unless they bring something from the outside.

The disciples, in confronting this new situation, are asked to respond out of their personal resources, they immediately feel inadequate and look for outside help. Jesus is a challenging teacher. He does not accept their instinctive move but directs them inside of themselves asking them what they might bring to the situation. Here is the key to the parable, **Jesus sees more in his followers than they see in themselves**. He is continually inviting them to reconceive who they are and what they can do. His disciples are asked to include faith among the resources that they have and be able to access it when needed.

The disciples are not alone in their failure to know what they have and to be able to access it. There is a social theory created by Kenneth Pargament, which basically says that every person brings an orienting system into each new situation, especially situations that are challenging and call for creative responses. (The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice). An orienting system is comprised of habits, beliefs, relationships, personality traits, previous experiences, etc. Each of us has our own orienting system.

Interestingly in our "orienting system," some of these features are resources and others are burdens. They are all within us waiting to be accessed and used. They are like a bank waiting to be withdrawn in a given situation. When a new situation emerges both the resources and the burdens can be called into action. Bringing forth burdens makes responding to the situation more difficult. Bringing forth resources increases the ability of one to negotiate a situation creatively.

Of course, to bring forth resources, you have to know they are there.

Consider this example of a man who discovered something in the mist of his own therapy.

The man described himself as "a wimp." He was a midlevel bank manager who felt pushed around, bullied and ineffectual. When he spoke about work, he became dull and boring, his voice was monotone and his shoulders drooped. The therapist found themselves getting very tired in the therapy sessions, the energy was so low

and discouraging. But the therapist tried something different looking for a new avenue they focused on the man's earlier years. He discovered that the man had put himself through school working two jobs, he had been on the boxing team in college, and he flew airplanes on the weekends – none of this was the behavior of a wimp.

The therapist was amazed at the difference in the man when he talked about these earlier days. When he talked about flying, he practically vibrated with excitement and energy. The man was surprised when the therapist commented on the difference between his style at work and his style behind the controls in the airplane. The key moment came when the man realized that the problem was not a “chronically wimpy personality,” but a failure to identify and tap into his own deeper resources. The man voiced his own solution this way, “I guess I need to fly at work.” People cannot cope with the tools they do not believe they have. (Psychology of Religion and Coping, 99-105).

Jesus kept telling people that they had the tools they needed to live in the kingdom of God. The resources were there all along. They had the faith they needed, even a small amount is enough. But if they don't know that they have these resources, they could not access them. So, Jesus uses a story to try to tell us that we are not “chronic wimps” but people who could fly in the exploration of a new world.

God doesn't need us to believe enough or try hard to make more faith. God calls us to be faithful with what we already have —to seek to do God's work in the world. Faithfulness is about being a witness to the grace and mercy of Jesus; it is about trusting in God's faithfulness to us even when our faith is wavering. We are faithful when we proclaim the good news and do acts of compassion, even on those days when our faith seems small. It's faithful to pray with a family when they learn their loved one is not going to get better. It's faithful to bring communion to a church member who can't make it to worship.

The disciples don't need more faith, nor do we. We are called to trust God with the faith we have. It's not a fancy faith and it may not seem like much, but in Christ it will move mountains. It is not about having enough; it's about knowing that we are enough, to the glory of God. You are enough. You have enough faith. And the way you gain more faith is to step out in faith, each little step takes you further down the path of trusting God to move the unmovable. This is what it means to be the people of God, here in this place. With God's help you are enough.

*Note: I am deeply indebted to the commentary on this passage by John Shea and for the story and notion of an “orienting system” in facing new situations and crisis.*