

Tracy Daub
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Luke 17:1-6; 2 Timothy 1:1-14

TRACE ELEMENT

My mother always made a point of buying salt that was labeled as *iodized*. When I wondered what difference it made, she explained that iodine was a trace element. Trace elements are minerals needed only in small amounts in the body but which are essential for the health of the body. Adding iodine to salt is an easy way for companies to ensure that consumers receive this trace but essential mineral in their diet.

There are a handful of other so called “trace elements” found on the periodic chart of elements: chromium, magnesium, iron, and some others. Had Jesus been consulted, maybe he would have also added faith to that list. Faith—even the size of a mustard seed—does great deal for the body and the soul.

The disciples, however, subscribe to the notion that more is better. They come to Jesus asking him to give them more faith. And it is understandable why they come to Jesus with such a request. Jesus has just finished teaching them about the difficult task of forgiveness. Jesus tells them that even if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns to you and asks you to forgive them, you are to forgive them each and every time. In other words, there is no finite allotment on forgiveness.

This, of course, is a daunting mandate. Most of us find it very hard to forgive a person once, let alone seven times a day! To fulfill Jesus’ mandate would be a monumental undertaking for most of us.

I am reminded of the 1970s film *Jaws*, about the great white shark that had been terrorizing a coastal town with its deadly strikes against swimmers and surfers. When a couple

of men set off in a boat to hunt down this murderous predator, they finally catch a glimpse of the great beast for the first time. And they are flabbergasted by the shark's mammoth size. And that is when one of the characters utters that famous line, "We're going to need a bigger boat."

After hearing Jesus' difficult teaching on forgiveness, the disciples knew they needed a bigger boat. In order to accomplish what Jesus was asking of them, they needed a much larger faith than the one they had. And so they beseech Jesus, "Increase our faith." They want more faith.

And that might be something we feel we need as well. We need more faith. Life is hard. This world is filled with tragedies and complexities. We may feel we need more faith. But maybe it is worth our while to ask ourselves what we think "more" faith will get us. How will more faith benefit us? Do we think more faith will mean an easier life? Will it mean less pain? Will it mean more certainty? Will it result in effortless obedience to God? What will having more faith get us?

Because, Jesus had immense faith in God and he certainly didn't have an easier life, a less painful life, or an effortless journey with God. So, the quantity of our faith does not necessarily result in those kinds of quantifiable benefits for this journey with God through life.

But instead of telling the disciples how to acquire more faith, Jesus tells them that even a trace amount of faith is sufficient for doing great things. "If you had 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."

If we are to make sense of Jesus' statement, maybe we had better first examine what we mean by *faith*. What is faith? For a lot of the world's religious people, faith is certainty in a set of religious truths and beliefs. Doctrines, creeds, codes of behavior are given to us and we are

told to believe in them if we want to be close to God or to be loved by God or to get into heaven when you die. That is what some people believe faith is.

Some people are taught that faith is never doubting, never questioning these sets of beliefs. When someone we know has suffered a great hardship or loss, we might question one another, “How is she doing?” And the other will answer, “Well, you know, her faith is so strong.” And we all admire such a person. But what do we mean when we say someone has strong faith? Do they never doubt, never question, never falter in some prescribed set of beliefs? Because most of us do. And the Bible is full of people of faith who sometimes doubted God, questioned God, even yelled at God. Go read the Book of Psalms if you don’t believe me.

In some traditions, people are blamed for supposedly not having “enough” faith. If they do not get what they pray for, if their cancer is not cured, if their husband doesn’t stop beating them, it is somehow chalked up to their not having “enough” faith. And so their hardship becomes their fault, their deficiency.

And yet, today we hear Jesus say that the value of one’s faith is not based on size or quantity because faith as small as a mustard seed is sufficient. So what do we make of that?

What if faith is holding to the belief that there is a God of great goodness and love, a God of mercy and forgiveness, a God who cares about each and every one of us, and a God who can bring about life from every form of death. What if faith is our efforts to lean into that belief, even when, at times, such a belief is as small as a mustard seed? Because in this deeply troubled world, in our deeply troubled lives, sometimes that’s all the faith we can summon up in a God of goodness and love, mercy and forgiveness, who cares for each of us and who can bring life out of every form of death. Sometimes that small amount is all we can find within ourselves.

The writer Lauren Winner shares a story in her memoir about her friend Julian. "When Julian was just twelve years old and preparing to be confirmed, she told her father--the pastor of the church--she wasn't sure she could go through with it. She wasn't sure she believed everything she was supposed to believe, at least not enough to make a promise before God and her congregation to believe those things forever.

Her father told her, 'What you promise when you are confirmed is not that you will believe this forever. What you promise when you are confirmed is that this is the story you will wrestle with forever.'"

This is the story we will wrestle with forever. What if we stop thinking about faith as certainty in a set of beliefs, and more about choosing to make this story the story we will wrestle with our entire lives: the story of the God of love, who revealed this love in Jesus, and who calls us to walk the way of love. That's our story. A good deal of the time we may wrestle with this story, with its difficult demands and its outlandish claims. We may sometimes doubt and question. But that is all part of having faith.

Maybe faith isn't so much something we "have" like a possession, but rather is something we practice—something we do. We do love. We do forgiveness. We do kindness. We do justice. We do generosity. And doing faith often involves a lot of wrestling. Check out the Old Testament story of Jacob who is recorded as having an actual wrestling match with God one night. Sometimes in the hardships of our lives, in the darkest nights of pain, when we may be overcome with doubt or feelings of abandonment, we wrestle with God. Sometimes when confronted with the world's overwhelming problems, the deeply broken state of humanity, the inadequacies we may feel in our efforts to change this world, we may wrestle with this story. And at such times we may reach into our pockets looking for faith in a God of goodness,

forgiveness, and transformation, and all we can find is a little bitty mustard seed. But Jesus tells us, that's ok. That's ok. Because that little bit of hope and faith in the God of goodness and love is sufficient.

The New Testament scholar N.T. Wright states, "It's not great faith you need; it is faith in a great God." And he offers this illustration about faith. "Faith," he states, "is like a window through which you can see something. What matters is not whether the window is six inches or six feet high; what matters is the God that your faith is looking out on. If it's the creator God, the God active in Jesus and the Spirit, then the tiniest little peep-hole of a window will give you access to power like you never dreamed of."

With our eyes looking through even the smallest peep-hole at this God of love and power, we then can take the next step forward, however faltering, to do any number of difficult, hard, or wondrous things: to forgive someone yet again, to help another person even if it is inconvenient, to work to right a wrong, to take a bold and scary new step, to give away our money and time to something that improves the world around us, or to get up and face another day even when our lives are burdened with struggle and pain. That's faith.

The writer Anne Lamott tells the story of when she once checked into a hotel with her young son Sam, who was around 3 or 4 years of age. Their hotel room actually consisted of two rooms with an adjoining door. At some point in their stay, Sam went into the other room and pushed the door closed. It was then that Anne discovered she couldn't open the door because it was locked from Sam's side. Sam grew distraught when he realized he couldn't open the door to get back to his mom. As he cried and banged on the door, Anne tried to shout to him the steps he needed to take to unlock the door. But the little boy was filled with panic and all he could do was sob with fear. Anne ran to the phone and frantically called the front desk, explaining the

situation and asking them to bring up a key to unlock the door. As she waited for help to arrive, Anne lay down on the floor and slid her fingers under the door. And she shouted to Sam to grab hold of her fingers. And he did. And as he clutched her fingers, Anne could hear his sobbing gradually subside.

In our moments of panic and struggle, it is rare, I believe, for our faith to offer us a fully formed God standing before us in our living room. Rather, most of the time, our faith is more like grasping hold of God's fingertips. We cling to just a little bit. But Jesus tells us that's ok. Jesus tells us we should not feel that our faith is insufficient. Because when it is the God of goodness and love we are grasping onto, when it is the God who transforms death into life whom we are gazing at through the peep hole, faith the size of a mustard seed is sufficient.