

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**October 2, 2022**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Clarksburg, WV**

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**Luke 17:5-10**

*The Apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our Faith." (Luke 17:5N.R.S.V.)*

## Increase Our Faith

The story is told of a certain woman who heard a sermon on this passage from Luke about if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to a tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would be so. That night the woman decided to test this out for herself. There was a big tree in her yard that leaned toward the house. And the woman was afraid that the tree might one day fall on the house. So she prayed that this troublesome tree would be uprooted and cast into the sea.

The next morning the woman got up and looked out her window. "Just like I thought," she said, "that tree is still there."

I always found that story funny because if the woman didn't think the tree would be moved, then she didn't really have faith. It is not all up to us, but there is an element of confident trust in the Lord that is needed. In James 1:6 we read these words, "But ask in faith, never doubting for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord."

So how does one increase in faith. Can one simply concentrate on denying doubt and therefore get what you pray for? I'm sure you will agree that it is not that simple.

The first thing to note is that everyone struggles with faith. In our text from Luke, the disciples ask Jesus, "Increase our faith." Now you would think that the first disciples had to be men of great faith. Here they were literally walking around with Jesus every day. They got to see his many miracles first hand. Yet, they are still asking, "Increase our faith."

In Matthew and Mark the disciples ask this question after they fail to heal a boy suffering from epileptic seizures. When Jesus is able to accomplish the healing where they failed, he tells them that their failure was due to a lack of faith. And that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they could move mountains.

Here in Luke, Jesus has told the disciples that they are to forgive others even if those others do the same thing seven times in the same day and each time asks forgiveness. Offering forgiveness

is among the most difficult of things that we ever have to do. Most of us struggle with being able to forgive even one time. But being able to forgive the same offense seven times in the same day. That seems like an impossible task. It is no wonder that the disciples say, "Increase our faith."

So if you have ever struggled with having faith, you are in good company. Even the disciples struggled.

The next thing I want to note is that faith is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and that it is part of an ongoing relationship with God. In Galatians 5, Paul tells us that one of the fruits of the spirit is faithfulness. And in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul tells us that the three great gifts of the Spirit are faith, hope, and love.

Now I want you to notice that Jesus does not instantly zap the disciples with great faith. Instead he simply tells them the benefits of having faith. If you had faith the size of the mustard seed, you could throw a tree or mountain into the sea. Later on they too will do great acts of healing and be able to demonstrate great courage in the face of persecution. But for now, they need to just keep following and learn to trust the Lord.

As our relationship with the Lord grows and our trust grows, so will our faith.

I was reading the other day about a client who asked his therapist, "How can I get God's voice to be louder?" That is a good question. I have wondered that myself. Wouldn't it be nice if we could find the volume control for God's voice?

The wise therapist answer, "God's voice is as loud as it's going to get. Some other places in the rest of your life have to become quieter if you're going to hear God." (Dynamic Preaching, 10-2-22, pg. 22). This rings very true to me. Sometimes we just have to quiet the sounds and distractions around us and spend quiet time with God.

Many of us think of faith as being loud and flashy. We think of having great faith as being like what we see on T.V. with the televangelists. We imagine that it is something where people shout, faint, and speak in tongues. We would like to have something that proves how powerful our faith is. But that isn't what the relationship with Christ is about. It is not about showing how strong we are. It is about quietly and faithfully following Christ and serving him.

The third thing that I want to note is that our faith is increased along the way. Faith is found in obedient service.

Now, let me be clear. We don't earn faith. It is still a gift of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, that gift is given to us to be used in Christ's service. The more we use the faith that we are given, the more we grow in that same faith.

At the end of our text, Jesus gives the example of the servant who works hard all day only to be

told that there is more work yet to be done. The servant has labored long hours in the field and upon returning to the house, is not allowed then to rest. Instead more is asked of the servant, first serve the master supper, then you may eat and rest yourself.

That is a tough text to swallow. Most of us don't really want to be a slave to anyone, not even God. But the text is a necessary reminder that Christian faith is not about our ease and comfort. It is not about our getting what we want out of God. It is not about our being in control. Sorry to burst your bubble, if you thought it was.

Many of us long for a super human faith that overcomes our weaknesses and erases our questions. Yet, genuine faith looks like a servant doing the tough, necessary, and even dirty work of obeying the master in all things.

It is worth remembering that Jesus does not ask from us anything that he himself was unwilling to do. In Philippians 2 we read that Christ did not misuse his powers for himself. Instead he humbled himself and became obedient even unto death.

And we are urged to have the same mind among us that Christ did.

Faith is not about having the power to be the center of the universe. Instead faith is about finding our proper place in a God centered universe.

My hometown pastor, Rev. Raborn once told me to be careful about praying for patience. He said that the only way to learn patience was by going through situations that require patience. So if you pray for patience, be prepared to go through difficult times.

Something similar happens with faith. We want to have more faith so that our lives will be easier. But God wants us to have more faith so that we can do his will. The most common way that God uses to increase our faith is by leading us through situations in which we must practice our faith. It is in the daily disciplines of submitting our will to God that God uses to do his will and to bring about the kingdom of God.

One of my favorite movies is the musical, "The Sound of Music." The movie is set in Austria just prior to the outbreak of WWII. We are introduced to a young nun named Maria. Maria is sent to be the nanny for Von Trapp children. Captain Von Trapp is a military man who is hopelessly lost as to how to manage his eight children after their mother dies. Maria with a mixture of love, faith, and music captures the hearts of not only the children, but also Captain Von Trapp. Eventually she and the captain marry. But then the Nazi government wants to force Captain Von Trapp to take a commission in the German army. Instead, by a mixture of courage, and faith - and with a little help from the Abby, the family escapes by walking across the mountains into Switzerland. There they gain world renown as the Von Trapp Family Singers.

The movie is based on a true story. And I recently came across the back story for Maria. As Paul Harvey used to say, "The rest of the story . . ." Maria's parents died when she was just a little girl. She lived for awhile with a cousin and then for a longer while with an abusive uncle. As a teenager she ran away from that abusive situation. She was filled with anger at society and at

God.

Maria only attended church for the occasional concert, she loved music. One day she went to a cathedral thinking a concert would be offered, but instead a young Jesuit priest preached a sermon. Afterwards, Maria approached the priest to demand, "How can you believe all this?"

The priest's only reply was for her to meet him there next Tuesday at 4 p.m. She came to the meeting and for the next two hours she poured out her anger at God and what she saw as his lack of mercy. To her surprise the young priest, after listening carefully, treated all that she had said as a confession. He said to her, "Take courage. I am going to pronounce the words, 'thy sins are forgiven . . .' God will forget them, and your soul will look like the soul of a newly baptized person."

As a personal aside, this seems to me to be the very opposite of what Maria needed. Yet, we are told that when the priest prayed over her that day, something did indeed change in her heart. She later reported that it felt like a great burden had been lifted from her. It was the beginning of a journey of healing and a return to faith for her.

In real life, the story of Maria and the Von Trapp family, their faith and their singing changed the lives of millions of people around the world.

I'm not sure if Maria ever prayed that God would increase her faith. Yet that is surely what God did. I also want to point out that though there was a beginning point when the priest prayed over her, for the most part the increase in faith was not sudden and dramatic. The increasing of her faith was accomplished as she was obedient to God in all the struggles she faced day by day.

Let me end with a reminder of this scripture from Mark 9. When the boy with the seizures was brought to Jesus, the father of the boy asks if it is possible for the boy to be healed. Jesus replies that all things are possible to one who believes. To which the father cries out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

In faith and in life, let this be our prayer also, "I believe, God, help my unbelief!"

Amen.