

Sermon: “We Need This Much”

Scripture: Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” The Lord replied, “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. Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather him say, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So, you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say ‘We are worthless slaves, we have done only what we ought to have done!’ “

Who among us does not want more faith? Most of us are not surprised at the disciples’ plea that Jesus gives 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 a constant reminder of how short we fall.

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 congregations assume a punitive or punishing tone when reading or hearing biblical texts. This assumed tone will repel many of our worshipers on this October morning. Some bring the scars of a Bible that has been misused on them.

Others have always assumed Christianity is all about guilt. My daughter-in-law says she can smell the guilt when she walks into her Catholic church. These perceptions stand as barriers between themselves and God who loves them.

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 the 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 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 selection, verses 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 had imagined. They are accountable for one another.

In fact, drowning in the sea would be preferable to causing a brother or sister from going astray. If they are wronged, he insists, they are to draw from a bottomless well of forgiveness. It is no wonder the disciples cry out, “Increase our faith!” They are not sure they are up to this, but Jesus changes the question from “How much faith is enough?” to “What is faith for?” He tells them, through image and story, “You already have the faith you need. Now fulfill its purpose: live it.

**LET ME TELL YOU A STORY:** Have you seen the legendary Western “The Magnificent Seven”? It depicts a poor Mexican village that is constantly raided by bandits. Desperate, the villagers hire seven gunmen to protect them. Not surprisingly, the children of the village see these colorful gunmen as heroes. Before the final battle, several of the boys gather around the gunman named O’Reilly, whose courage they admire. “We are ashamed to live here,” one boy says, “Our fathers are cowards.” Suddenly O’Reilly scolds the boys. “You think I am brave because I carry a gun? Your fathers are much braver, because they carry responsibility, for you, your brothers, your sisters, your mothers. This responsibility is like a big rock that weighs a ton. It bends and twist them. There’s nobody who says they have to do this. They do it because they love you. I

have never had that kind of courage.” The boys are humbled by the gunman’s sermon, and they begin to see their fathers in a different light.

Movies are about dramatic moments, but I think real courage is in the quiet, daily struggle to do what’s right. It’s about a mother who lives in a difficult marriage for the sake of her children. It’s about a husband who is faithful to his wife, even when surrounded by temptations. It’s about a teacher who would like to retire but keeps going back because she loves the children in her charge. They ask for NO special reward, they are doing what they are supposed to do.

After Jesus uses the example of a mustard seed to say that faith is not quantifiable, he tells this parable about a master and a slave to show them what he means.

In the contemporary Western world, it is difficult 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, we see that Jesus is describing a relationship. Does the servant deserve congratulations simply for doing his job, he asks? Should she be rewarded for doing what is expected? “Of course not!” What Jesus describes is a relationship between master and servant 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 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 from all sorts of missteps. In this divine economy, faith is less about personal fortitude and more about mutual forbearance, 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 this economy, 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 illusion of self-reliance, acknowledging that faith cannot be measured, only enacted.

In this economy of faith, 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. AMEN.

#### BENEDICTION:

In verse 10, Jesus asks the disciples to identify with the slave/servant who, after all, was simply doing his duty – we have done only what we ought to have done. In the most amazing demonstration of servanthood, he knelt before each one of them on the night of his arrest and washed their feet. GO IN PEACE.

#### PRAYER:

Eternal God, look mercifully upon this church, and upon your servants. We praise you for joys and accomplishments and for your grace, which has nurtured and sustained us. Bind us ever closer to one another and draw us nearer to our Lord Jesus Christ, that we may continue to minister in this community with patience and love, with wisdom and joy, until we come at last with all the saints to the place you have prepared; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.