

EVERYDAY FAITH

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Luke 17:1-10

A distraught man sought the advice of his wise pastor. “I was born blind,” he exclaimed, “But some people tell me that if I had more faith I could be healed.”

The pastor paused a moment before speaking. “I see you carry a cane,” he said. “Whenever people say that, hit them over the head with the cane. Then tell them if they had more faith it wouldn’t hurt!”

How many of you would like to have more faith? How many of you feel that if you had just a little more faith you could really get things done? I’m up here each week talking about discipleship and commitment and good works, and challenging you (I hope) to be disciples of Christ. How many of you are thinking, “Yes. I want to do all of that, but I’m just not ready yet. What I need is more faith to get me going.”

Now, nothing would make me happier than to be able to give you more faith, a booster shot when you need it. All I need is a fountain of faith. Maybe our delivery system could be the communion cup. “Here, have a shot of faith.” Or maybe by doing works or attending Sunday school each week you get a fortification of faith.

In our reading today, the disciples make the request that Jesus *increase their faith*. They want more. They need more. My first reaction is that the disciples are being self-serving by asking for more faith. But when I look at the challenges Jesus puts before them, I think I would demand the same thing. Jesus has a history of extraordinary expectations—give to anyone who begs from you, turn the other cheek, and more. I can sympathize with the disciples for feeling overwhelmed, wondering if they are cut out for this discipleship thing.

As we read today, Jesus offers more on the expectations of discipleship.

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First, Jesus talks to his disciples about stumbling in faith. He says, *Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come!* In other words, people of faith will stumble, the will falter, they will sin, but heaven help anyone that is the cause of that stumbling.

Jesus continues saying that it would better for them if a millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea than if they would cause any of *these little ones to stumble*. By little ones, he does not mean small children, but those who are less mature in their faith.¹ Those who are mature in their faith can

¹ cf Leviticus 19:14

be strong role models. They can also easily cause a weak one to falter. The apostle Paul addresses this in his letter to the Corinthians when he writes, *But take care that this [freedom] of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.*

Secondly, Jesus teaches about forgiveness. He says, if another disciple sins, then you must reprimand the offender. However, if that person repents, then you must forgive them. Even if this is repeated seven times a day, you must forgive.

Now, not causing someone to stumble is one thing, but forgiving those who sin is another, especially if they sin against us. In response, the disciples turn to Jesus and make that request for more faith. They are going to need it.

Jesus' tells the disciples that if they had faith the size of the tiny mustard seed, they then could say to the mulberry tree, *Be uprooted and planted in the sea*, and it would obey. But that is, of course, impossible. Trees don't uproot themselves and jump into the ocean.

What Jesus is telling his disciples is not about having more faith, but using the faith they already possess. Faith in any amount has immeasurable power. It can do the impossible.

The reading continues with another teaching about discipleship. Disciples, Jesus says, have a job to do. Unfortunately, this particular teaching is couched in the language of slavery. Slavery was part of the culture of Jesus' day. It is a bit of a challenge for us to understand.

Jesus poses a question to his disciples. He asks who among them would say to their slave when the slave has just come in from the field at the end of the day, *Come here at once and take your place at the table?* The obvious answer is 'none.' Slaves don't have a place at the table of the master.

Instead, the master would say, *Fix my supper. Serve me while I eat and drink. Later, when I'm done, you can eat.* That is the proper order of things.

Then Jesus asks if you thank the slave for doing what he was commanded to do. The answer is, of course, no. Maybe it's like Basic Training in the Army. When the Drill Sergeant orders the platoon on a run, it's not like he is going to thank them when they are done. The job of the Drill Sergeant is to command; the job of the troops is to follow. It is the same with the master and the slaves. It is the same with disciples—they have their job, they have their place.

Then Jesus says, *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.'*

Again, the slavery imagery is difficult for us today. But Jesus' point is that as disciples, we have jobs to do. We don't do them for the adulation or gratitude. We do them because it is what we do.

Once again, I can hear Luke the pastor coming through in Jesus' words. Through these words Luke is teaching his people that to be faithful does not require that they be heroic. As one theologian says about this passage, "Faith, ~~as Jesus describes it~~, is just doing your job, just doing your duty, not because of any sense of reward but simply because it needs doing. Faith, in other words, is doing what needs to be done right in front of you."²

As I look out over this congregation, what do I wish for? Do I want a congregation that has one or two superheroes performing one or two incredible feats of faith? Or do I want a congregation where everyone performs smaller, human-sized feats of faith—some of which we may never even notice.

I would much rather have the second. I want every person engaged in expressions of faith, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. For example, when I invite the children down, what I say to them repeats week after week. I encourage them to show kindness and mercy and compassion, to look for the kid that is ignored, to show love for others. It is simple stuff. But if it sinks in then it will take root and will grow. Faith isn't a concept, it is a muscle. And like any muscle, the more it is exercised the stronger it will become. For the kids, for us all.

I want to tell a story. It may sound like I am bragging, but trust me I am not. The story surprises me and I was there. One Saturday, last summer, I was working in the yard and needed to run to Walmart and then to Lowes to get some mulch. So I hooked up my trailer and went first to Walmart. I needed just one thing there and I knew where to get it. I parked in the parking lot as close as I could with my trailer next to a large electrical truck—a bucket truck—and ran in and was back in minutes. As I got to my car I noticed that the electrical truck had moved, but just a few feet. I came around the truck and saw that my trailer had also moved. The truck had run into my trailer. The driver was standing there and asked if that was my trailer. I said it was and he began to apologize about hitting it. He said he hadn't seen it. And he couldn't. The trailer was too low and in the driver's blind spot. I should not have parked it where I did. He continued to apologize and says that he wants to pay for the damage. He said he would have to give me cash because if he filed a claim with his company it would mean a lot of paperwork. I looked at the trailer and told him it wasn't necessary. Everything was fine. He pointed at the broken taillight. I told him the taillight had been broken for months. I just hadn't replaced it. He said the arm that held the taillight was bent. I told him I would bend it back. He said the weld might break. I told him I had friend with an arc welder. He could fix it for me. The driver was very nice and seemed confused that I would not take any money from him. Finally, he looked at me and asked, "Are you married?" Well, I have to admit, this is not where I expected this conversation to go. I told him I was married. He said, "Your wife must think she is the luckiest woman in the world to be married to you." To which I replied, "I'm sure she does."

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2773>

This story is a reminder to me about the little, unexpected, unplanned ways that we can be disciples of Christ in this world.

What if it were possible to tally up all the good you did this past week? As employers, employees, as students, as parents, as volunteers, and more. I have a feeling we would find a mountain of good. I'm not talking about the extraordinary acts but the everyday occurrences. It would include giving an employee a second chance, fixing a meal for your family, offering a hand to a neighbor, helping a stranger change a tire, being a good friend, listening to someone going through a divorce, being a careful driver, paying your taxes. I can't begin to list everything. But I am confident that you do all of this and more not because you wake up and say, "today I will do good deeds," you do it because you choose to be a disciple of Christ. You "do what you ought to have done."

Now, imagine that in the past week none of those things had been done. Our community, our world would be a bit darker, wouldn't it? As people of faith, how we lead our lives matters to us, to God, to the world.

So each week as I preach about discipleship and I challenge you to be disciples, you need not worry about having enough faith. You have it. I can see it. I can feel it. It may be small, but it is enough. Just be a disciple; exercise your faith; do your job as a follower of Christ. You can move mulberry trees. You can move mountains.