

Proper 22C: Luke 17:5-10
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Church of the Good Shepherd

Reaching Forward and Falling Backward in Faith

Hearing this morning's Gospel lesson, you get the sense that you've walked into the middle of a conversation, and you're not quite sure what everyone is talking about. We hear the apostles pleading, "Increase our faith!" but we don't know why they're asking, what prompted their request. The natural thing to do would be to look for a clue in the preceding verses. But if you opened your Bible to Luke chapter 17, you'd discover that the first four verses don't provide much of a context either, just a warning about temptation and directions about forgiveness. No obvious connection there. The chapter headings aren't much help either. The New Revised Standard Version chose as its sub-heading "Some Sayings of Jesus." About as generic as you can get. The New International Version opted for something that looks like the beginning of a shopping list: "Sin, Faith, Duty" (we're tempted to add "Eggs, Milk, Toilet Paper. . .") Evidently, even people who put together Bible translations don't have any better idea what to make of—or do with—these verses. We might just take a page from the game show *Jeopardy* and call the chapter "Potpourri," for all that these verses have in common. Even the verses just after the part about increasing faith strike us as a *non sequitur*—as we just heard, Jesus moves from faith and mustard seeds to a parable about how God doesn't owe us anything, how we are just meritless servants. As younger folks might say, "Well, that was random."

Ok, so if there's no clear antecedent to the disciples' request, maybe there was some form of free-floating anxiety among Jesus' followers, they worried about not having enough faith. Or, maybe they just felt like you could always use more faith, so they just periodically asked for more. Or perhaps the precise reason for their asking isn't important, because whatever it was, whether it was Jesus' instruction on forgiving those that hurt us or the teaching about marriage and divorce in the last chapter, or the warning about the dangers of wealth we heard last week, or the call to take up their cross the week before that—whatever it was, it was something that the disciples felt was too hard for them. "Jesus, we just can't do it, we're too weak, you gotta give us more faith."

Ever felt that way? Have you ever sat here in church, hearing a sermon that really cuts to the heart, or read in your Bibles a passage that sounds good but you just can't bring yourself to follow it? You want to do it, but it means letting go of something dear to you, and you are not ready to do that, even if you believe God has something better in store for you. It reminds me of the famous prayer made by St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was someone who had strong feelings, strong drives. He realized he was letting his passions get the better of him, so he prayed, "Lord, grant me chastity and self-control...*but just not yet.*" Maybe that isn't *exactly* your prayer, but you can understand where he was coming from. We want to do right, to follow Jesus, but we don't feel we have it in us.

If that situation is familiar to you, then you can understand the disciples' request, "Lord, increase our faith!" We are just not up to the task of obeying Jesus, we think, we can't do it on our own.

Theologically, that may well be true—we can't do anything good without God's grace. Our wills were too weak, too enslaved to sin. But that, Jesus recognizes, is not really the question here. The issue is rather the disciples' misunderstanding of faith.

The disciples, you see, as with most of us, seem to think of faith as something we have. We think of faith as a *thing*, an object, something akin to “spiritual gasoline” that gets doled out by the gallon to fuel our life and ministry. Maybe we have a full tank of faith or maybe we are running on fumes most days. But faith is something we have, that fills our tanks, that we are in danger of running low on. The way Jesus speaks of faith, though, faith isn't a thing, a noun, but a verb, not something you have but something you *do*. As Jesus says, “If you have faith even the size of a tiny mustard seed, you can say to this tree, ‘Get up,’ and it will toss itself into the sea.” The point of faith, Jesus seems to be saying, isn't how much you have, but rather what you do with it. In other words, faith isn't faith until it's put into action.

The reason this is so is because faith isn't simply a matter of thinking the right thoughts or how real God feels to you at any moment. It's about trust, trusting God, trusting him to make good on his promises to us. Rather than providing us with *power*, “spiritual gasoline,” faith, trusting in God, gives us a *place*, a place to stand, an anchor amidst all in life that tries to knock us down, toss us around, and pull us under. This having a place to stand is no small thing, though. As the Greek philosopher Archimedes said, “Give me a place to plant my feet, and a lever long enough, and I will move the world.” Now, Jesus doesn't promise we can move the world, but he does promise us that with faith, we can move mulberry trees—which is no small feat!

Thinking of faith as a place to stand doesn't mean we are standing still, though. The thrust of faith, the purpose of it, as Jesus points out, is to do something with it, to act on it, to act *from* it. The point of *faith* is to act *faithfully*, to go forward in faith, to live boldly because we trust in God and in the goodness of what he tells us. It is by faith that we preach good news to the lost, by faith that we speak Jesus' name into unwelcoming situations, by faith that we defend the truth against the world's dehumanizing lies, by faith that we protect the persecuted and minister to the needy, and by faith that we willingly give our lives and our treasure for God's mission. By faith, we can do all manner of bold, risky things.

Living out our faith means taking risks, involves adventure, reaching forth boldly, but at the same time we also understand that faith entails letting go, letting go of everything that holds us back from trusting God—our fears, our pride, our hurts.

It's like the story the writer Walter Wangerin tells from his childhood. When Walter was a kid growing up in Chicago, there was a great big cherry tree in his yard where he would hide from his parents to read and daydream and such. Well, one afternoon, he was up in the tree when a summer thunderstorm rolled in. The sky grew black. Dust whirled higher than the house. A lightning bolt dropped from the clouds. For an instant there was an odd, perfect calm. Then the thunder crashed. And that was only the first. Boom! Boom! said the black sky. “Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!” Walt called out. The tree he was in bowed deeply and rose again. The wind sucked his shirt up to the back of his neck, and rain hit like B-B's. He had been holding tight to the tree trunk, but then he felt his arms slipping. “Daddeeee!” he screamed. And there he was! His father stood framed by the back door. “Here! Out here! Up here in the tree! Daddy, come get me!”

Little Walt rode that tree like he was riding huge waves on the ocean. His father saw him, and he came out, and Walt felt relieved because he knew his father would climb up and carry him down. But that wasn't his plan at all. He came to a spot right below the young boy and lifted his arms and called, "Let go." "What?" "Let go the branches, Wally. I'll catch you." Let go? Walter thought he had a crazy man for a father. He was a half a mile below him. He had always boasted about how strong his father's arms were, but now it looked like he had hotdog sticks for arms. If he let go, he figured, he'd hit the ground and die. "No!" he screamed. Walt was determined to stay right here till the storm had passed. But a greater rush of wind bent the tree backward and cracked the limb at the trunk. Walt dropped a foot. His eyes flew open. He didn't shout, he was so scared. Then the wood whined and splintered and the limb sank, and so did Walt...No, he didn't jump. He didn't choose to let go. He fell. In that swift, eternal instant he thought, This is what it's like to die. But his father caught him. And he squeezed Walt to himself. Walt wrapped his arms around his father and began to cry. He caught him. That's what faith is like, the older Walter contends. Sometimes we are asked to take a leap of faith; other times we have to let go and fall into it.

When Jesus' followers ask him for more faith, he responds by challenging them to put their faith into action—to both let go of their fears and their excuses and to strive forward in faith. He understood that they—we—don't need more faith, we need make use of the faith we already have. We have more than enough to do what God expects of us, to live Godly lives.

It may not seem that way, when we look around and see everything we don't have—packed pews, children running around, teenagers in our youth program or when you hear stories like the ones I've shared with you recently, stories about people who did some pretty amazing things in faith—the would-be governor Grace Thomas who challenged segregation in Georgia, the Irish monk-missionaries who spread the Gospel throughout Europe, the pastor of who led 70,000 in a non-violent protest against communism in Leipzig, Germany, Clarence Jordan who founded Koinonia Farms and Millard Fuller who started Habitat for Humanity. We hear these stories and we think they're inspiring, and maybe we'd love for God to do amazing things through us too, but we just don't have as much faith as they do.

That's not true, of course. And thinking that way can serve as just an excuse. Jesus challenges us not to focus on what we don't have, but on what we do. He challenges us to see that God has given us everything we need, everything we need to follow him. We have the Scriptures (stories of faith), the sacraments (pledges of faith), and the Spirit, alive our churches. This is everything we need to live bold, faithful lives.

This does not mean then that we should rest on our laurels, or be content with the status quo, or, worse, that we accept a slow decline of the church in America. Indeed, if anything, Jesus' teaching about faith is a call to action, a summons to use what we have, to leverage our position, to mobilize our assets, to redeploy what we've been given in the service of our mission to "know Christ and make him known."

That is the impulse behind our Capital Campaign. We'll be talking more about the specifics of that plan in a little bit, after worship. But right now I can tell you the aim, the vision of the Campaign is to use what we have, to renovate our facilities and employ our assets for mission, in

the service of attracting and welcoming new members and new families and involving them in the worship of God and the life of Christ. And we will be asking your help to make that happen.

Fact is, we have all we need here. God has given us everything we need to follow him, given us every reason to trust him, even in the hard times, in the times of doubt. The question is, what do we do with it? How can we use what we have and enhance it to glorify God and invite others to join our common life? How do we let go of our fears and step out on faith towards God's future and mission? With faith just the size of a mustard seed, we can do miracles, God can work miracles through us. What miracles is God itching to do in us? I bet you it's more than moving mulberries...!