

Got Faith!  
Luke 17:5-10

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

There are no surprises today in our text? It doesn't surprise me that the disciples were asking Jesus to "increase their faith", since they were incapable of doing what Jesus expected of them. What he was teaching was not popular. It often contradicted society's norms. It often called for a behavior that was radically different than what was acceptable. He challenge them to break away from tradition, put personal needs aside and serve without praise. No wonder they requested that Jesus give them more faith. Our world teaches that more is better.

We're conditioned to believe that what we do is worthless unless we are getting something out of it. We need the reward. We live in a culture that suffers from a blue ribbon mentality. We are obsessed with winning, receiving awards or being recognized for our accomplishments. We aspire to rating systems, award ceremonies and achievement banquets. I am always amazed when one football running back or quarterback gets selected for the Heisman Trophy and paid millions of dollars, given air time and interviews on T.V. and worshipped by millions of people around the country, all while the front line men who got him there are all forgotten. Instead we lift up and strive to be like those who get recognized, that are awarded accolades and great honors.

Even in our church denomination we have folks like Martin Luther, Henry Muhlenberg, Dietrich Bonhoeffer as giants of the Lutheran Faith who have become role models, man recorded in history for starting a movement, a leader of a nation, and a martyr of the faith. This is not to minimize their personal contributions, risking their very lives for what they believed. But whenever we elevate someone to positions of greatness all others feel a sense of inadequacy or unworthiness. We start to wonder about our own effectiveness and self worth. Do we have enough. Bigger is better the world tells us, the stronger the better, the braver the better, the richer the better, winning is everything. Just get a little more and we might have it, right!

The disciples we can understand what just that, they want more! Lord, Rabbi, Jesus, increase our faith. Give us more instructions perhaps, more power. Maybe even a deeper level of spirituality. Give us greater faith. It makes sense that the disciples just like people today, would want more. The world tells us to seek it, grab it, achieve it, why not get more faith than anyone else. Lord Increase our Faith.

But that is where the twist comes in. None of this is given. Notice that Jesus did not hand out any blue ribbons or give any trophies. Nor did he make any comparisons amongst the disciples, even rebuking them and scolding them for talking about which one of them is the greatest. The disciples obviously assumed they needed more faith but the faith they have already is not even being used fully.

Jesus illustrates this with a tiny mustard seed. One of the tiniest seeds in the world, but the bush that grows from it is quite large. The listeners of Jesus' story would understand right away that he is speaking of what they would consider a weed, a malignant plant that pushes its way in and can grow to nine feet tall, over taking other plants and destroying gardens. And it all comes from this tiny little seed. His point is that faith does not have to be weighed out by the pounds or ounces like weights on a scale to be measured. Even the tiniest amount of faith can have amazing results. Jesus goes on to say that if you have the scarcest amount of faith, like that of a mustard seed, you could uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea.

Here is another illustration that Jesus tries to use that might be lost on us today, since most of us don't do planting of mulberry trees. But in Jesus' day the agricultural society in which he is preaching would understand this in an instant. A Mulberry tree has a tremendous root system. It is not a simple matter to uproot it. It was a common tree that often got entangled in the water systems and wells of the day. They were a menace, even more so than the Mustard bushes, mainly because they were nearly impossible to remove. And if you think about Jesus even makes it more impossible, by saying you can have it planted in the sea. Have you ever tried digging in sand, in water. Every time you dig a hole, the waves move and the hole is filled up again, it is nearly impossible. That is the point. It is so preposterous to think you can dig this bush entirely up and then plant this same bush in the sea. It is senseless to even try.

But Jesus says even with the tiniest bit of faith, even the impossible things can happen for those who are faithful to God. Jesus gives an entirely different understanding of what faith is than what we think. We want miracles, we want amazing deeds of history, but Jesus says the master invites the servant in from his world, his regular work, the work that is expected of him. That is simply what we are to live in with faith, doing the work that God expects from us as his children, to live as his people. It means putting aside our personal wants, thoughts and expectations, and seeking to do God's work in everything. No trophies, No Heismens, No Oscars, No blue ribbons, just simply living in the love of God as servants of God, giving as God has given to us.

I believe that this understanding of faith happens in three ways: 1) the unexpected, 2) the unaccepted, 3) the unappreciated. Sometimes it is by doing the unexpected that things begin to happen. The church and members of the body of Christ can learn from this tactic. Do the unexpected, love someone everybody hates, love your enemy, prayer for those who revile you, offer help to those who refuse to help you. Not following tradition for tradition sake but doing what works best, can make things happen. Real faith can happen when people are ready to risk doing the unexpected.

At other times faith mandates that we do the unaccepted. It is easy to do the acceptable things. By doing what is acceptable, we are comfortable, and everybody knows exactly what we are going to do. But by doing the unacceptable, changing the tactics a bit and doing what isn't the normal routine understand action, can do wonders. What is considered normal and acceptable is overcome with taking risks and doing what may not be popular at times. The early church fought for their religious right to believe in what was unacceptable by society. Today we face that same tendency in the world. We no longer live in a Christian World, but are instead forced to do the unacceptable and believe when the majority of facts, human expectations, societal laws dictate we do otherwise. We face a world where the Christian church continues to have to stretch to not accept the ways of the world and instead to struggle to keep doing the unacceptable things. To trust and have faith enough that through this we are serving God in wonderful ways.

And lastly faith is occurring when there is work being done that goes unappreciated. That is not to say that it is not great to get appreciation. And it is not to say that we should not appreciate those who do hard work for the cause of Christ. But it is to say that there lots of people who do many things that never get thanks, talked about, or that are even seen. They simply go along the way doing the faith living in the trust of God and no one else may ever know. Just look back at those leaders of Lutheran History, Martin Luther, Henry Muhlenberg, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, they did not work alone, but there are many people who helped them, taught them, encouraged them, that have never been written about or remembered, but they were integral to making those men who they were. They went about their faith work and were unappreciated.

So what amount of faith does it take to make miracles happen, just a little bit. The disciples asked to have their faith increased, and Christ asks them what they are doing with the amount they have now. How much faith do you need to believe to accept, to risk, to live. We have that faith as people of God, as a church, may we learn to trust in that and with God all things can happen. Amen.

10/3/2010

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May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.  
AMEN.