

“Increase Our Faith!”

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Pentecost 17

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. Does today’s gospel story sound familiar? Jesus talks about faith and then talks about a mustard seed. I’m sure that this story reminds you of the parable of the mustard seed from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 13. In that story, Jesus describes the Kingdom of Heaven as a tiny mustard seed that a farmer sows in the field, and it blossoms into the biggest shrub of all. That story is an allegory of how the tiniest bit of faith can yield tremendous results.

The story we read today comes from the Gospel of Luke, but Luke’s mustard seed has nothing to do with the Kingdom of Heaven. Today’s gospel story is part of the teachings of Jesus to the disciples about the nature of faith. You see, the disciples are starting to realize that following Jesus will be more difficult than they originally imagined. They are starting to doubt their ability to deal with all that life and ministry is going to throw at them, and they go into panic mode. They are looking for anything that will help them meet the challenges of ministry. Help us, Jesus! *Increase our faith!*—they call to the Lord.

If you look up this story in the Lutheran Study Bible, you will see that verses one through 10 have the title, “Some Sayings of Jesus.” So to put this discussion in context, I thought I would read you two of the verses that come before our Gospel reading. Jesus says, ³*Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive.* ⁴*And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.*” Today’s gospel reading picks up right after this statement about repentance. Then...*The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”*

Is it any wonder that the apostles ask for more faith after being told that they should forgive repeat offenders? Does their reaction sound familiar? Don’t we often try to measure our faith in a similar manner? And don’t we often beat ourselves up because we feel we are lacking in faith? How many times have you been wronged by someone and thought to yourself, “Well, maybe the Christian thing would be to forgive that person, but I just can’t seem to do that. I guess that makes me a bad Christian. I guess that makes me a bad person.”

Dear friends, this gospel story is actually good news for us. If you cannot forgive someone it does not mean that you are a bad person or that God does not love you. It does not mean that you are a bad Christian. It simply means that you are human. You do not need “more” faith. You have enough faith. We all do. What is more important is what we do with our faith. What is important is that we are open to the loving and healing presence of God in our lives, and that we are willing to ask for God’s help. Even if we are not ready to forgive, we must at least be aware that forgiveness is asked of us, and be willing to move toward forgiveness.

The point in this story is that faith cannot be measured and it cannot be stored up each time we do a good deed. Faith is not something that has to do with human ability. It is not a reward for a life well-lived in obedience to God. Faith is a gift that comes from God and gives us the ability to trust God’s presence. Faith is the ability to give up our reliance on self. Faith means that we can admit to ourselves that there are times that we are not in control of what happens. When

these times occur, faith means trusting that God will redeem us from those things that we are helpless against.

Think for a moment. Did you perform any good deeds this week? Did you help someone who asked for help? Did you spend time with someone? Were you a good listener when someone needed to talk? Did you go to work and complete your duties with integrity? Did you volunteer your time? Did you prepare meals for loved ones? Did you pray for someone or some situation? Did you visit someone in the hospital? Did you pick up the phone and reach out to someone who was lonely? I hope these examples help you put your faith into perspective. The servants in our gospel story don't look for great thanks simply for doing their work—they just do it. And that is what faith is like. Faith is the willingness to do what needs to be done because we know that it glorifies God, even in small ways. Acts of faith aren't always heroic—they are simply what needs to be done. We all have enough faith to do them.

And it doesn't matter how young or old we are. Several weeks ago, we heard about the dreadful shooting at Anunciation Catholic Church in Minneapolis. During the back-to-school mass, two children lost their lives and 21 people were injured. I was particularly moved by the actions of two children. One, a boy named Victor, threw himself over a younger child and was hit in the back. Another child, a 12-year-old named Lydia, did the same, and saved the life of one of her young friends. She was injured in the process and is still recovering.

These two young people thought first of the younger children and wanted to protect them. To me, this an example of what faith is all about—the everyday acts of doing what needs to be done by responding to the needs around us and caring for the people God puts into our lives. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus points to the everyday people who lived in his world whose lives reflected simple acts of faith, like the centurion whose servant was ill, the woman who touched Jesus' cloak, the Samaritan leper who came back to thank Jesus for healing, and the blind man who begged for sight. These people were not heroes in the conventional sense, but they were faithful to the Lord and to his mission. They trusted that Jesus would lead them and heal them in ways that they could not imagine.

Our faith is like that. Faith is a trust that Jesus can do what we can't, and that our acts of faith are honorable and blessed by God. What would happen if we didn't do those everyday acts of compassion and caring that I asked you about earlier? The world would not be the grace-filled place that we try to maintain. Hearts would remain hardened and blessed communities would not exist. Let us give thanks to God for the everyday, faithful acts of people who reach out to help and care for others. For their devotion and their integrity, let us all say, "Thanks be to God." **Amen.**