

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Increase what exactly?

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have, what I consider to be, a somewhat embarrassing story from my youth to share with you. Did that get your attention? Good! If I'm going to embarrass myself I want it to be worth it! I have several distinct memories from the age of about 9 or 10 of wandering around the seminary grounds in South Africa where we lived at the time and making wagers with God. Now, that's not the embarrassing part, I'm fairly confident that most of us have likely done something similar at one point or another. No, the embarrassing part is this...I would wager with God and the wager would involve...oh gosh...really... please don't laugh too hard...barrels of love.

I would wager 5 barrels of love that I could make a tricky shot while playing soccer or that I could climb to a certain height in a tree; that sort of thing. But then it evolved into bargaining with God. I'd find myself thinking, "God, if you help with such-and-such I'll love you an extra 10 barrels of love." Okay...confessing all that wasn't too bad...but still...admitting that is embarrassing!

Of course, this is pretty terrible theology, but I think it illustrates a common proclivity for humans. We tend to want to commoditize things that shouldn't be commodities. Why? Well, I tend to think it's because we learn from a very young age to categorize, compare, and measure things. Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing, it's a part of what makes us human, but we often start to overuse those skills, even in areas where it makes no sense. We want to be able to measure our love, or God's love; somehow it makes it more concrete. Being able to measure such things also allows us to compare ourselves to others. I am more loved than that person, though perhaps less loved than that one. It's a completely ridiculous and rather foolish way of operating, but it seems to be a part of our brokenness.

“Increase our faith” the disciples beg of Jesus. As if faith works like that! As if we can somehow tell how much (or little) faith another person has. As if we can even tell how much faith we ourselves have! The disciples seem to think they don’t have enough faith. Why is their faith not enough? To understand that we need to consider the verses that lead up to our reading today. What caused these followers of Christ to worry that their faith isn’t enough?

Luke 17:1b-5 (NRSV) has Jesus warning those disciples: “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 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.”

That was the alarming teaching that led those disciples to beg for more faith. The knowledge that following the Way of Christ means living life centered on supporting one another in following Christ and forgiving one another, not just once or twice, but repeatedly...as often as necessary! Living life in such a manner seemed so impossible to the disciples that they concluded that the only way they could do it was if Christ somehow improved their faith to be more than what it was at that time.

Jesus responds with a thunderous proclamation...that if they had ANY faith it wouldn’t be a problem to live such a life. The disciples beg for more faith, Jesus wants them to have faith period...even as little faith as the tiny mustard seed. Their begging for more indicates they’ve missed the point of faith entirely. Which is surprising since Jesus has publically commended several people at this point in Luke’s gospel for their faith. Apparently, the disciples weren’t paying very close attention.

Jesus commends the faith of the paralyzed man’s friends when they lower him down through the roof.¹ He is amazed at the faith of the Roman centurion who seeks healing for his servant.² He tells the sinful woman who anoints his feet at the Pharisee’s table that “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”³ He calls the woman with the hemorrhages “Daughter” and tells her that her “your

¹ Luke 5:20 (NRSV)

² Luke 7:9 (NRSV)

³ Luke 7:50b (NRSV)

faith has made you well”⁴ when she dares to touch the hem of his cloak. Later on in the chapter we read from today Jesus heals ten lepers and tells the one who returns to thank him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well”⁵ And then, near Jericho, he heals a blind beggar and says to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.”⁶

The disciples were there for most of these encounters! Yet they still miss the point of faith almost entirely! It’s not about measuring things. It’s not about saying the right words. It’s not about doing certain rituals or appearing pious. Faith, at least from the examples that Jesus acknowledges in Luke, is entirely about turning to Jesus (often in desperation) as the source of healing, wholeness, forgiveness, and life.

We can commend the disciples for at least knowing who to turn to when they need help, but they completely misunderstand what they’re asking for. It’s not about more, it’s not about measuring or comparing, it’s not about actions or accomplishments. It is entirely about knowing who Jesus is and living as he taught us to live...living as we were created to live. Faith is about orienting our life around Christ, walking the Way that Christ shows us.

We need not pray for **more** faith, but we can certainly pray to have **any** faith. We can certainly pray that when the chips are down, when we find ourselves in difficult situations or times of trial, we can pray that we respond faithfully by loving God and loving our neighbor. By repenting and trusting in God’s mercy and grace. By forgiving and loving the people around us. That orientation, that way of living, is what faith is.

Were the paralyzed man’s friends trying to increase their faith in order to help their friend? Was the hemorrhaging woman expecting to earn help by keeping the Law? The lepers or the blind beggar, were they posturing righteousness? No, none of them were concerned with any of that; rather they simply turned to Jesus in hope, trusting that he embodied God’s healing love. Trusting that he meant it when he said that he came to proclaim “good news to the poor...release to the captive...sight to the blind...freedom to the oppressed.”⁷

Jesus ends his response to the disciples with a parable about the master’s expectations of his slave. What are God’s expectations of those disciples?

⁴ Luke 8:48b (NRSV)

⁵ Luke 17:19b (NRSV)

⁶ Luke 18:42b (NRSV)

⁷ Luke 4:18 (NRSV)

Should they expect special privileges or rewards for doing what is expected of them? Should we? Jesus is inviting those disciples to live as they were created to live: in Christ-centered community, seeking always to live out God's call to mercy, justice, peace, grace, and love. Jesus is teaching those stubborn, slow disciples that faith is how we Walk the Way, it is how we live as we were created to live, it is the basis of right relationship with God and with our neighbors! And if we do follow in the Way we can and will do amazing things. Amen.