

Sunday, October 6, 2019
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 22 (Year C)
2 Timothy 1.1-14; Luke 17.5-10
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“The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’” (Lk 17.5). To my analytically oriented mind, that begs the question, “how does one measure faith?” After all, you need to measure something to see what you have before you can determine if it needs to be increased.

This request from the apostles comes right after Jesus delivers a lesson on what true discipleship means. That those who are true disciples need to hold one another accountable, they are to repent of their sins as soon as they are aware of them, and they are to forgive one another. But I think what the real presenting issue for the apostles seeking an increase in faith is the slowly dawning realization that the end is near. This conversation with Jesus takes place as he is traveling toward Jerusalem. Toward his death. Before setting his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus told his apostles two times what would happen—that “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Lk 9.22). And on this journey to Jerusalem, Jesus took the opportunity to teach his disciples about the inner workings of his ministry and gave 70 of his followers some hands-on practice in engaging in this ministry (Lk 10.1-16). I think all of this was bubbling under the surface, and as they get closer and closer to Jerusalem, as they reflect on where they have been and what they have seen, the reality is starting to set in. Soon, they will be left without their Master. They will be the ones responsible for carrying on his work. And that undoubtedly raises questions—and anxieties—about their readiness for such a monumental task. A task that can only be completed by acting out of faith. And compared to their Master, they realize they come up short in the faith department, and as a result, feel inadequate.

When I hear the apostles ask for increased faith, I cannot help but think of a former co-worker of mine. Karen was one of the staff biologists at the consulting firm I used to work for. She was a top-notch scientist, but also struggled with issues of faith. She had been raised Roman Catholic, but had drifted away from the church sometime earlier in her life. It was during the early years of my friendship with Karen that I had a re-awakening or a renewal of my own faith journey. It was during this time that I found the Episcopal Church and was launched headlong into parish life and an intensive exploration of my own spiritual path. Karen was aware of this and we would often have conversations about religion and spirituality. Being the consummate scientist, some of this was a challenge for Karen. Once she set her mind on figuring out or understanding something, she was tenacious. And while she saw no conflict between science and religion, I think she tried to approach religion from a more scientific, rationalistic perspective to seek answers. An approach which just doesn’t work. Faith cannot be measured or approached from a purely scientific perspective. This was a cause of great frustration for Karen.

She and I were very much alike in a lot of ways. Professionally we were both in fields that required logical, orderly approaches to issues and problems. And I think what was frustrating for her was that I was somehow able to suspend my analytical mind when it came to matters of religion and faith, whereas she did not quite know how to do that. On more than one occasion

she would say to me that she saw how important my faith was to me and that she wished she could have that experience, too. She would ask me how she could “get” what I had. How she could increase her own faith, the way mine had been increased in those early years after returning to the Church.

I felt so helpless. I really wanted to help Karen, but didn’t know how. All I could tell her was that the expression of faith is unique to each individual and that we all have our own path to realizing that. As such, there is no way I could know, let alone tell her, what was right for her. All I could do was invite her to go to church with me, which she did regularly. Now that wouldn’t have worked for some people. But since Karen had a basic foundation due to her early years in the church and a profound desire to explore her faith, she would have a fighting chance.

Karen did join the Episcopal Church and seemed to find some satisfaction in our tradition and the broadness that it affords. I have lost touch with her, but I sometimes wonder, particularly when this and similar Gospel lessons roll around in the lectionary, if Karen ever found what she was looking for.

So what does Jesus have to say to help the apostles, and the Karens of the world, in their desire to deepen their faith?

Jesus first uses the image of the mustard seed—the smallest of seeds which grows into a great plant—as an image for the life of faith. In using the image of the mustard seed, Jesus is implying that it does not matter how much faith one has, because even a small amount of faith—the fact that one has any faith at all—has the potential of growing exponentially into something far greater. That through faith, no matter how seemingly small, one can accomplish great things. Even unimaginable things, like causing a mulberry tree to become uprooted and planted in the sea. Yes, a silly image, but one that illustrates that nothing is impossible when it comes to faith or when one operates within the bounds of faith.

And then Jesus shifts gears, going to a completely different and seemingly unrelated image—that of slaves. Or more specifically, the responsibilities of slaves to their master. To paraphrase this portion of Jesus’ response so that it makes a little more sense, Jesus asks if it would be reasonable to expect a master to let a slave off the hook from his responsibilities just because he has already done a lot of work—to let the slave take a pass on serving dinner just because he has worked all day in the fields. To have the master serve the slave, instead of vice versa. No, that would be neither customary nor reasonable. Instead, the slave would be expected to complete his appointed duties—to serve dinner—and then when all the chores are done, the slave will have a chance to eat and relax. And the implication is that it is also not reasonable for the slave to receive special reward for doing what is merely part of his job description. In using this image of a slave performing his duties, Jesus is actually lifting up the characteristic of obedience. Obedience to one’s master and to one’s responsibilities.

To relate this part of the conversation to the matter at hand—increasing one’s faith—Jesus is reminding the disciples, and us, that as his followers, we have a responsibility to serve our Master, to serve God. Our “job” is to live out the Gospel in our daily lives. Our “job” is to serve

God and God's vision for the world in our every action. Jesus is reminding us that we are to adopt an attitude of servant ministry whereby our actions are responses to our identity as Christians.

Reading between the lines, what Jesus is getting at in relating our "job description" as Christians to the desire to have increased faith is that one way to grow in faith is to continually engage in the work of the Gospel. That in our ongoing efforts to love God and particularly to love others, we see more and more of who God is. We see more and more of what God is really about. That God is all about love, compassion, and mercy. As we engage in the work of the Gospel that helps to demonstrate these qualities to others, when we see these qualities manifest in the lives of those we minister to, we begin to see more and more how God's love, compassion, and mercy are manifest in our own lives. We begin to trust more and more in who God is and what God can and does accomplish in our lives. That is the outward manifestation of faith.

Our Epistle reading from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy provides another angle on the issue of personal faith and how it develops and grows—a perspective that is not specifically stated by Jesus, but is inherent within and foundational to his understanding of faith and its development. Paul writes words of encouragement to Timothy, reminding him that faith is a gift from God. He further reminds him that the development and nurture of that faith does not happen on its own. Rather it happens in community, citing the examples of Timothy's mother and grandmother as those who initially helped nurture Timothy's faith. And that it is in the community of other Christians that faith continues to be nurtured and flourish. Paul concludes with a prayer that is also a reminder: "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us" (2 Tim 1.14). That we are to treasure the precious gift of faith given by God and to allow the Holy Spirit to continue to nurture our faith and guide us in how we live that out in our daily lives.

Summing up how faith operates and its relationship to the desire to increase our faith, one commentator writes: "it is not the quantity, but the genuineness of faith that matters. The disciples are not to underestimate their faith, but to claim and use it; for even the smallest, most infinitesimal grain of faith will bring God's power to bear upon the needs of the world . . . This faith is characterized by openness to God and absolute trust in the Lord that is not dependent on one's own intelligence, talents, or influence. Faith is not so much what humans do, or do not do, but what the limitless power of God working through them can accomplish" (*Synthesis*, Proper 22, 10/6/19).

Who of us, at one time or another, has not wished, or even prayed to God, "increase my faith"? The fact that we are even able to make that plea means we already have a certain amount of faith. If we continue to be obedient to God's commands, seeking to live the Gospel in our lives, we will find that the real issue is not how much faith we have and whether it is enough. The real issue is what we do with the faith God has gifted to us, and realizing that God uses us, uses what we already have, to make remarkable things happen.