

Use the Faith You Have

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Preaching on:

Luke 17:1–5

I was visiting a church once that was dealing with a number of simultaneous setbacks and a lot of blame about what had happened and conflict about how to move forward. The minister was an eloquent and dedicated leader. And he was doing his best to press on. And on worship that Sunday he prayed a beautiful version of a prayer that's not uncommon in churches everywhere. He prayed something like this:

“Yes, Lord, increase our faith! Increase my faith so I can serve you better! Increase the faith of Christians everywhere because we’re nothing without you! Increase the faith of this lost and sinful nation because we’ve left the narrow path of your righteous way! Increase our faith that we might be just a little more worthy of your Gospel! Amen.”

I felt a little bad for my colleague because I’m a minister too and I know how us ministers can think. We get all worked up and worried about the faith. We get to thinking that it’s our job to increase the faith of the congregation, to increase the faith of the Church, or the nation, or the world even. We all do it, us ministers. I do it from time-to-time. If only we just had some more of the good stuff! It’s an understandable mistake. You may not be a minister, but I bet you probably do it too.

I want to be a better person, a better Christian. I want to live a cleaner life. I want to do right by the people I love. If only I had a little more faith. Or If only I had a little more money, then I could be generous with people the way I want to be. If only I had a little more talent, then I could’ve been somebody. If only I had a little more time, then I’d sign up to volunteer, I’d get involved in all the places, in all the causes that need me. If only, if only, if only. How many times have you said to yourself, “If only I had a little more, then—watch out world—you’d really see something! But I don’t, so I can’t and I won’t.”

Whatever you think you’re missing, they’re all variations on this theme, “If I had more, I could do more and I could be more.” When times are tough and life gets hard, we blame the problems we face on the lack of some key ingredient that is preventing us from tackling the problem. And if we internalize that missing ingredient, if what’s missing is inside of us, we start to telling ourselves that any effort we might make would be a big waste of time because I am not made that way. Now the problem isn’t the problem anymore. The problem is that something is missing. Do we feel better? Not really. Now we toss and turn all night thinking about what’s missing. We lie there in the dark, our minds racing, and sometimes we start to pray: “God, do you hear what I’m saying? You want me to make something of myself? You want me to serve you and this world, well, I’m going to need you pony up, Lord. Increase my faith!”

Beloved, the desire to pray for more faith is just a spiritual distraction. When the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, he rebuked them! “Increase your faith?! Increase your faith?! Don’t you realize that with just a mustard seed of faith you could uproot a mulberry tree—a tree with roots as deep as its branches are high—and you could make that tree walk all the way down the shore, and you could make that tree plant itself, not in the soil of the earth, but in the salt waters of the sea.” Jesus is telling us again, as he so often does, that a little can go a really long way—further than you can possibly imagine. And the Kingdom of God that Jesus has come to proclaim is not the Kingdom of the big, the proud, and the powerful. It is the kingdom of the poor, the humble, and the meek.

Beloved, please hear this before you ever again doubt that you have enough faith to be a good Christian. The Kingdom of God is not the kingdom of somebody's great faith. It's the kingdom of the tiniest, littlest, barely worth mentioning bit of faith that changed the whole world—it's the light shining in the darkness, it's a baby born in a barn, it's the mustard seed weed that just got lucky and happened to land in the right spot to grow and grow and grow.

So, we don't pray for more faith. Because asking is the wrong way to get it. Faith is not being doled out by the angels from on high to anybody who asks for it. That's not the way faith works. Let's look at the second half of scripture reading this morning. Jesus asks his disciples (and all of us):

Don't you treat your servants and slaves like garbage? Don't you expect them to scrape and serve? Don't you expect them to do it for nothing? And yet you have the audacity to serve God Almighty as if you were owed something for merely doing the right thing. Faith is not transactional. It is not a way of getting ahead. It is not a way to earn favor or avoid disaster. It is not done to earn eternal salvation or your ticket to heaven. Your faith is your commitment, your reliability, your loyalty to the command to serve God and your neighbors.

Faith and commitment are not something you can spend. And they're not something you can be given. Faith is like a seed. It grows if you plant it. It's like a muscle. It grows when you use it. It doesn't matter how much faith you have. What matters is what you DO with the faith you've got.

All around the world, the church is reeling. Up north, down south, the coasts, and middle America, progressive and conservative, mainline and evangelical, everyone is reporting the same thing coming back from COVID—fewer people in worship, fewer visitors, less money, old volunteers retiring and not enough new blood to replace them. Too little, too little, too little, too little. If only, if only, if only, if only. But this, Beloved, Glen Ridge Congregational Church, this is the Gospel of Jesus Christ: A little goes a long way! Don't waste your time wishing for more. What are we going to do with what we've got? Are we going to let ourselves tell ourselves a story of scarcity and loss and circumstances beyond our control? Or do we instead believe what Jesus promised us? That all it takes is a mustard seed of faith to make some wild things happen—things nobody's ever seen before. What are we going to do with the faith we've got?

Beloved, you have everything you need! What are you going to do with what you've got?