

A Smidgen of Faith

Luke 17: 5-10

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Good morning.

Today I want to talk about two topics raised by this morning's Gospel reading.

The first topic is the question, "How can I find the strength to do all the things God has called on me to do?" And the second question flows from the first, "Can I actually make a difference?"

You know, lately the world has seemed at times a dark and threatening place.

For many people, job security never returned after the Recession. Income inequality is rising. Homelessness is rising.

We are constantly bombarded by attempts to manipulate facts and we experience social media being used to denigrate and attack.

We are constantly lied to by institutions of authority.

Racial injustice in this country continues, and overt racism and religious bigotry have reemerged from the shadows.

Frankly, sometimes I let the enormity of all this reduce me to a feeling of helplessness. Maybe that has happened to you, too. I know that God has called me, and called you, to fight back. I know that I have been told to love God with all my heart and all my mind, and to take that love into the world and love my neighbor like myself.

I know I should do this, but I wonder if I can summon faith strong enough to do it.

Usually when I wrestle with this kind of spiritual dilemma, reading Scripture helps. But sometimes it doesn't, particularly if you start with the Old Testament. Because it seems to be full of stories about people who did amazing things only because of their towering pillars of faith. Look at Abraham's faith as he prepared to sacrifice his son.¹ Moses' faith was so strong that God spoke to him face to face, "as one speaks to a friend."²

Golly.

Also, in the Old Testament, things don't always go so well for people whose faith is found wanting. Just ask Lot's wife. Or anybody else from Sodom and Gomorrah.³ Even Israel, God's chosen people, failed the faith test repeatedly. We are told in today's reading from Lamentations that Jerusalem has been conquered because of "the multitude of her transgressions."⁴

¹ Genesis 22:1-19.

² Exodus 33:11.

³ Genesis 19:1-29.

⁴ Lamentations 1:5.

Okay, so to summarize at this point in our stroll through the OT, there seem to be plenty of places where it takes tremendous faith to address important things. And Israel flames out more often than the good-guy superheroes in the first half of a Marvel Comics movie.

So, it's really not a surprise at the beginning of today's Gospel reading in Luke that the apostles are not so sure that their faith is up to the task. "Increase our faith," they plead to Jesus.⁵

What Jesus says in reply is pretty interesting. In the NRSV version that we Episcopalians use as our standard bible text, Jesus replies, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."⁶

I think I understand the metaphor, although I'm not sure what the seed and the tree have exactly to do with each other. Scholars think that the author of Luke combined two thoughts. In Matthew, we read a Q source metaphor about mustard seed faith.⁷ And in Mark there is a passage about a fig tree and faith in God moving a mountain into the sea.^{8,9} Luke was probably written after Mark and Matthew, so this may be the 2,000-year foreshadowing of mash-up tapes.

I see some puzzled faces. If you are over 40, ask your kids what a mash-up mix is.

Sometimes reading a different Bible translation can make things clearer. I especially like a translation called *The Message*, prepared by the late Presbyterian theologian Eugene Peterson.¹⁰ Rather than being a literal translation, like the NRSV is, *The Message* tries to use language similar to contemporary conversation.

Listen to the *Message* version:

"The apostles came up and said to the Master, "Give us more faith."

"But the Master said, "You don't need *more* faith. There is no 'more' or 'less' in faith. If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Go jump in the lake,' and it would do it."¹¹

Now, *that* seems pretty clear. There is no *more* or *less* in faith. If you have *faith*, you have enough. Much, much more than you realize.

And indeed, once your eyes are opened on that score, you can find throughout Luke examples of humble people whose quiet faith is enough. The woman who anoints Jesus' feet,¹² the blind beggar who wants to see,¹³ the Samaritan leper,¹⁴ the bleeding woman.¹⁵

⁵ Luke 17:5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Matthew 17:20.

⁸ Mark 11:20-25

⁹ Here I am repeating points argued by Lois Malcolm, Professor of Systematic Theology at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, MN, and Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, PA.

¹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Navpress, 2002).

¹¹ Luke 17:5-6, MSG.

¹² Luke 7:40-50.

¹³ Luke 18:35-42.

¹⁴ Luke 17:19.

¹⁵ Luke 8:43-48.

So, listen to what Jesus is telling us in Luke. If we have *faith*, we *do* have *enough* faith. And we can, each of us, do great things with it. Because the power of faith does not come from within *us*. It comes from God.

This is what Paul is reminding Timothy in today's epistle. Listen to the *Message* translation:

“We can only keep on going, after all, by the power of God, who first saved us and then called us to this holy work. We had nothing to do with it. It was all *his* idea, a gift prepared for us in Jesus long before we knew anything about it. But we know it now.”¹⁶

So, remember the first question I wanted to talk about was, “Do I have the strength I need to do God's work?” Luke 17 is a pretty encouraging answer. Your faith comes from a source of unlimited power. Just sit in the pews this morning and think about that for a moment. You can draw on God's energy. Do you get a glimmer of possibility? Think about it: You, and everyone sitting with you in church this morning, could move a mountain. Please don't get carried away and do it—I'm not sure our insurance covers it. But isn't it interesting to think of you and the person sitting next to you in a wholly different light?

So now, to the second question. The problems are so big. Can you make a difference?

Here, I think the references I made to the other parts of Luke are relevant. The message from Jesus is that we fix the world one local problem at a time, and that when we help, it completely changes the lives of those we help, like the blind beggar.

Have you participated in the Holy Cross porridge program? It did not end hunger in Africa. But think of the impact on the student you helped and their family.

Have you made sandwiches with the Outreach Committee? We haven't ended hunger in the United States, but think how what you did may have given a hungry person hope as well as nourishment.

Have you served on the altar this year at Holy Cross? Not everyone in the world is yet a Christian, but you have helped all of the people sitting in the pews around you to have a deeper relationship with God.

I think sometimes we do not give ourselves enough credit. Does my individual effort, my service to Christ, fix all the problems?

No.

But have each of us, through our community at Holy Cross and work in the world produced some micro-miracles? *Yes!*

Our Stewardship campaign is about to kick off. I hope I have helped set the stage for that. But, even more important, I hope the sermon this morning has helped you take back a feeling of power, as an individual Christian, over what can seem like a rising tide of evil in the world.

Our faith *is* strong enough, if we believe it is.

Even a *smidgen* of faith will do.

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 1:1-14, MSG.

We are Christians, and we will not let evil defeat us.

Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco publishes online a wonderful prayer resource, and they have a prayer on-point for this sermon and I would like to close with it. I invite you to join me in prayer:

Dear Lord, when evil darkens our world, give us light.

When despair numbs our souls, give us hope. When we stumble and fall, lift us up. When doubts assail us, give us faith.

When nothing seems sure, give us trust.

When ideals fade, give us vision.

When we lose our way, be our guide! That we may find serenity in Your presence, and purpose in doing Your will.¹⁷

Amen.

¹⁷ Accessed October 4, 2019, at <https://gracecathedral.org/prayers-difficult-times/>