

Increase our Faith!

Luke 17:5-10

The disciples turned to Jesus and said, "Increase our faith." You, Jesus, who can turn water into wine, who can draw food for thousands out of a few baskets, do this one thing for us. Perform this simple miracle. Increase our faith.

The disciples didn't yet understand faith. They had grown up in a tradition of legalistic piety, and saw the fruits of the religious life as rewards for the chosen. Perhaps they thought Jesus was describing faith as some particular quality that better enabled them to find favor with God. They thought they were supposed to take this new thing and plug it back into their old religious system.

But Jesus rebuked them. Faith, he said, was not something that can be taken for granted as being simply a part of the religious life. Faith and religion are not the same thing.

This gets obscured in our own language. The word *faith* is often used to mean religion or denomination, which suggests incorrectly that all religious people understand faith the same way. We are asked, "What faith are you? Which faith do you practice?" 'Faith' becomes a shorthand word for 'religion,' but I think that this greatly misrepresents what Jesus was teaching. Jesus taught faith as an *opposite* of religion, if you think of religion as a system of rules to follow in order to please God. Faith is something quite different.

I think of faith as the willing submission of one's heart and one's mind to the reality of God's love for us. And faith is more than just this act of submission: there is, grounding the act of faith the ever-important question of *why*. Why do we submit? We do it not because we hope that it will get us what we ask for. We do it not because it will make us better at being religious. I believe that we practice faith because God created us to do it, because like violins fashioned to create beautiful music we are vessels created to know and express the truth of God's love. The *act* of faith is this submission. The *why* of faith is, because we were created to do it.

Perhaps a metaphor that can help to describe faith - though imperfect - is music. Think of faith as being something like music. You can't really possess music, but you certainly can be possessed by it! If you don't know how to play or even to read music, then musicians might appear to be doing something incomprehensible. But the smallest steps are all you need to start to learn. You can practice it and even get better at it...and some people are greatly gifted with it. And by the grace of God, even those who don't play or understand music can enjoy it

and be transformed by it. Music, like faith, is something that envelops us, and speaks to us of the being of God. And like tuning our instruments to strike a proper note, taking those *first steps in faith* is less about gaining the right piece of knowledge, or even about deciding to believe something, than it is about tuning ourselves to become receptive to the truth of God's love for us.

Jesus and his followers both spoke of faith, but I think they understood it very differently. The disciples thought of faith as something they didn't have enough of, but Jesus said instead to think of faith not simply as something that you need *more* of; rather, think in terms of the kernel of faith that you already have, and learn to trust that God is using that to transform you. "If you had faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

Jesus spoke of a *new* relationship with God, and his disciples seemed to think that an increase in faith would make that new relationship possible. They thought of faith as the prerequisite of this new relationship that Jesus described, and so they asked Jesus for a shortcut. Give us this faith, and we'll be ready.

But the shortcut would not have been faithful at all. That would bypass the lifelong process of submission, prayer and growth without which the experience of God would ring hollow. Their faith might appear to be strong, but ultimately it would be a faith not in God but in themselves, and would bear witness in a vacuum instead of to a world in need.

Faith is not usually something bequeathed to us in one miraculous act. It is encountered and deepened in the narrative of our real lives. Faith comes alive when we realize that we might not have as much as we want, but that God brings forth so much from so little. This is what the mustard seed parable is all about. Remember that Jesus says nothing by accident: when he says to the apostles, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed" a great big asterisk appears out of nowhere over his left shoulder, and a footnote pops up at his feet saying: *see above: Luke 13:19* so that the apostles could pull out their pocket scrolls and read, "What is the kingdom of God like? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." Our tiniest faith bears fruit in the real world.

A quick increase in faith would be meaningless. Faith, like the mustard seed, takes time to grow into its full potential. Without realizing this, *the disciples were asking to skip that process*, to quickly gain enough faith that they could rest, safe in the knowledge that they knew everything they needed to about Christ's message.

They wanted to have it figured it out. But the true blessing of faith is that we will never figure it out. We aren't supposed to.

Faith is not about knowing that everything will happen the way we hope it will. Faith looks into an uncertain future, not expecting that certainty, but trusting that God will be present in it. Faith is about starting life with what we need, remembering what was placed in us at our creation, and letting that seed transform us. Perhaps that seed never leaves our consciousness, but for many of us it does, only to resurface years later as a thought or a question: perhaps that thought is, "I want to come back to church," or "I want to learn more about what Jesus taught." Or perhaps the question that surfaces is a little more challenging, such as, "I don't know if the faith of my childhood makes sense anymore," or even, "Even when I'm in church, I feel pain." Some of those questions can feel like a loss of faith, but I believe that they can also be the first signs of the mustard seed planting roots, as we each grow into a new understanding of what faith truly is.

If we think of how we live our lives, how we allow ourselves to be transformed by the love of God, those first plantings of faith are every bit as important as the final harvest. Only two generations after the resurrection, the earliest Christians seemed to be beginning to ask, "When will we achieve this faith that was promised to us? When will we get there?" To them Luke offered this story as an admonishment to remember that the first plantings of faith give shape to our lives, every bit as much as the harvest. In this life, we will never stop growing in the knowledge of God's love if we continue to offer our whole selves.

Faith is so much more than an object or a quantity that can be increased. Our language can barely fathom its own limits with regards to faith, and so we are left not with one definition but with many shades of definitions. Faith is a trajectory; an openness to the horizon of our lives, and a knowledge that God remains at the center of our being. Faith is the gift of God at our creation, the seed placed in our souls at our beginning. Faith is the surrender of ourselves; the submission of our whole selves to the depth of God's love - for us, and for the world. We do not possess faith, but we are possessed by it, and though the fruits of our seedling faith may not be visible to us today, we trust that God will use those seeds to transform us, and to use us to transform the world.

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens

Year C Proper 22

October 6, 2013

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro NC