

“Go With What You’ve Got”

A Sermon Based on Luke 17:5-10
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
on Sunday, October 6th, 2019
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The lesson from Luke begins with the disciples making an impassioned plea: “Increase our faith!” It arises from a feeling that we all have had. There is some great, good task standing before us. But there is also the sense that the task will not be easy: like getting ready for the Illinois Marathon or the Tent Sale.

The feeling is one of being overwhelmed, or daunted. That is how most of us would characterize such a challenge. We might imagine that’s how the offensive unit of football team feels, huddled in the endzone to call the first play from their own 3 yard line, to begin a drive to score a winning touchdown with a minute 57 left to play.

I wonder, though, if the feeling is not more one of being intimidated. When we fully see what is required, all at once, sometimes at the beginning, we feel intimidated. All of our self-confidence may evaporate, and we wonder how in the world we will ever do it all. That is how the disciples felt. “Increase our faith.”

What we read today are positive instructions on the demands of discipleship. Jesus taught these to the disciples after he had a lengthy exchange with the Pharisees, who had been mocking him. Jesus responded by telling the truth about them. They lifted themselves up as examples of piety. Jesus said they were guilty of false piety. They presented themselves as the keepers of the Law. Jesus said that they failed to keep the very laws which they posed to protect.

In other words, beyond their shameless hypocrisy, their faith was all in themselves, what they could do, what they had accomplished, how much they had on hand. It is after that exchange that Jesus taught the disciples.

II

He began by telling them about temptation. He said, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone to whom they come!...Be on your guard!”

The disciples must have begun to think, "O.K. Temptations are bound to come. We can't avoid them. But woe to those who give in? How can we win?"

Jesus then got specific. "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." "So that is what he means," the disciples thought.

But then they realize what that means. "Forgive the same person, even when that dummy sins against me seven times in one day?!" They must have had this unbelieving look on their faces, as if they were asking Jesus, "Are you serious?"

When they realized by seeing that the expression on the face of Jesus did not change, that it remained earnest, they throw up their hands and say, "Increase our faith!"

They fully appreciated just how difficult it is to forgive, even those whom they know well, even those whom they like or love, not just once, but time after time. Forgive once, anyone can do that. Twice even, we can summon the resolve to forgive. But much more than that and we say, "Enough!" Three strikes and you are out, some might say.

Like those first stunned, maybe confused disciples, we can appreciate how difficult this one expectation is. Then, we contemplate all of the other tasks beyond forgiveness, and we find ourselves crying out just as they did.

There are, after all, still so many who are hungry. There are so many who need clothes, with winter not far away. There are so many who do not have adequate shelter. There are so many lonely, isolated people, who would welcome visits.

And then there are the larger matters which seem so far beyond our control. What about peace, and peacemaking? Are we doing the things that make for peace?

Are you feeling daunted yet? Like the disciples, are you praying "Increase our faith?"

If so, good. That is such a good prayer to pray. For where the Pharisees were wanting to talk about their abilities and their accomplishments, we can understand all over again that our abilities and our accomplishments are not nearly as important as our openness to what God can do and what God desires.

III

In the letter to the Hebrews, we find that marvelous 11th chapter, in which the preacher celebrates the great ones of our faith. Are they celebrated for their great abilities? No, not really. They are celebrated because of their faith, faith not in themselves, but faith in God.

Looking over that long litany of faithful people, people whose flesh and blood were no different from ours, we may begin to sense that faith is not really quantifiable. It's not a thing that can be measured.

So when we feel weak, when we feel daunted before a task, our need is not that of being filled with a substance called faith. When we are dehydrated, yes, we need to drink water. But lacking faith does not work that way. Lacking faith has much more to do with not being open to what God is dreaming, and what God can do.

One of the great gifts of being part of the church is hearing the stories of those who have passed through hard times. Sometimes we hear their stories, and we find ourselves thinking, "You know, I wonder if I could have faced what you faced and overcome it as well as you did. I just don't know if I have that much faith."

When I have actually given voice to such a thought, I have almost always heard a reply that sounds like this: "I don't think my faith is any greater than anyone else's. I didn't really know how much faith I had until I needed it. All I know is that God helped me. I could not have made it through otherwise."

You can hear it in Ken Burns' program on World War II. One of the gentlemen said that some hold them up as heroes. He said that he didn't feel like a hero. He was just a guy who did what he was supposed to do. Which sounds remarkably like something Jesus said today. "When you have done all that you

were supposed to do, say, “We’re just slaves. We’ve only done what we ought to have done.”

When he said, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed,…” Jesus was not criticizing the disciples. He was telling them that faith is not really measurable in the way, maybe, that their plea suggested. He was telling them that they have sufficient faith. In fact, tremendous faith is not required for the task.

Instead, the question is one of their openness to God and their trust in God’s way. He reminded them that they are in touch with the power of God. Nothing is impossible for a faith that lays hold of that power. And he reminded them that it is God who empowers them. God enables them to be disciples. They do not follow solely on their own strength. Neither do we.

This is an even greater temptation for us, in our can-do culture of self-sufficiency. The truth is we cannot be faithful disciples by relying solely on our own wits, wisdom or strength. It is God who makes it possible for us to be disciples.

In a certain sense, the disciples were right to say, “Increase our faith.” The lesson that Jesus was trying to teach them was that they live under new rules with him. They cannot continue to live guided by the old rules, the rules of society, the rules of their culture.

In the waters of baptism, they declared that they had died to the old way of life, and that they had been raised as new people, who live in a new way, who had life only because Jesus had given them life.

With those disciples, we are right to pray “Increase our faith.” For after we are baptized, we can still be seduced by the world’s ways. The patterns of behavior that we learn over the years are not so easy to walk away from. And so we keep falling back into the world’s way of living, and into the world’s way of thinking. And I believe this is one reason we have so little peace. We keep returning, over and over, to the world’s old, tired ways.

Jesus wanted the disciples to understand that our weakness for the ways of the world will be no excuse for not living as he taught. And not only that, when

we are faithful, we have done nothing extraordinary. We have simply done the absolute minimum of what life in his Kingdom requires.

When we expect praise, when we are disappointed that our faithful deeds go unrecognized and unrewarded, then we are little different than the self-justifying Pharisees who did so many things simply to be noticed. Our accomplishments of faith are not really our own. We are never the only ones doing the work. Indeed, we could do nothing of lasting value if God were not at work within us and around us.

That, I think, is where the comfort is in these uncomfortable teachings, these demands, of Jesus. We need not be intimidated by the task that stands before us. Even the little mustard seed of faith we possess is sufficient when that seed is rooted in God's dream's and God's abilities.

For this truth, for this promise, thanks be to God. Amen.