

October 6, 2013

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost Luke 17:5-10

I get a feeling from many people that they are tired. Not sleepy tired, but tired by the many demands of life. I understand why. With a job, two kids, a house, a dog, other family needs and some community work there is a lot to do. Even though I work to not let my kids overschedule themselves they are still in plenty.

I think our cultural standards of "making it" are pretty exhausting. You have to work hard, be creative, and be a little bit lucky. In this, the world's biggest economy - "the land of opportunity" - life can be a real burden.

From time to time the church council has talked about having church be an oasis from this burden. It's a wonderful thought - a place and a time to worship, to relax and to be with friends - but it too has needs which add to the burdens of life. It takes a lot of time, talent and money from a lot of people to make this place flourish.

Many of us were taught that the church should always be the top priority in our lives, but that is easier said than done. In a busy schedule how to you carve out time for a meeting or event or music practice or whatever might be. The church becomes one more burden.

And yet we want to be "good people." We want to serve. We want have our priorities straight. We want to be in alignment with what God created us to be. We want to be strong enough to resist temptations and have the courage to boldly and confidently live our faith. But it all seems so hard.

I think that feeling takes us to the disciples where we meet the in our gospel reading. Just prior to this Jesus had been teaching them many hard things. There were teachings about the law, teachings about marriage, teachings about forgiveness, and teachings about doing things that make other people stumble in their faith.

We also have to remember that all of this teaching is occurring while Jesus is on the road with his disciples traveling from their homes in the north near Capernaum down to

Jerusalem. This is Jesus final and ultimate journey. The disciples have left home and family behind. They're already stretched. Then they get these hard teachings with dire warnings. Like us, they want to follow. They want to succeed. They want to be good disciples, but the task seems all too hard.

So they cry out, "Increase our faith!" After all, they need it. They aren't up to the task. They need more strength in order to do it. And they are turning to the place they know they need to turn for more strength - Jesus, their Lord and master.

So Jesus replies, "If you have 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."

What an odd thing to say. In fact, what a totally nonsensical thing to say! Some people try to clarify and define what Jesus means here. (Do the disciples not even have faith the size of a mustard seed? Do none of us?) But I count myself among those who take a totally different point of view here when they study this passage. Rolf Jacobson, professor at Luther

Seminary says this is sarcasm. Jesus is being sarcastic with the disciples. He is playfully mocking their request for more faith.

The disciples think faith is a commodity that can be measured. Some people have more. Some people have less. Obviously you want to have more. And which of us hasn't at some point asked God for essentially the same thing? "God, give me strength to get through this." "God help me, I'm in over my head." "God, I can't make it on my own."

And the answer is: faith isn't a commodity. You can't measure it. There's no such thing as more or less. Let's make the disciples' request funny. They might as well said to Jesus, "Give me more mommies." No, I can't give you more mommies. Everybody has a mother, and everybody has only one. You can't have more. You may not have liked your mother. Your mother may have been nasty and abusive, but there's no such thing as more mommies.

There's no such thing as "more faith". Faith can't be measured. Faith is a relationship of trust with God. Faith is

a way of life, or perhaps I should say that faith is a disposition for living. You can't really measure your disposition for something.

Theologian David Lose, also of Luther Seminary, gives this advice to pastors preaching on this text:

Many of our people may feel a lot like these disciples: Overwhelmed by the demands they feel placed on them to be "good Christians," not sure they are up to the task, and wondering what they signed on for. No wonder, then, that some of our folks feel like being a disciple is beyond them.

And so it's our job to remind them that faith doesn't have to be heroic.

Faith, as Jesus describes it, is just doing your job, just doing your duty, not because of any sense of reward but simply because it needs doing. Faith, in other words, is doing what needs to be done right in front of you and this, Jesus says, the disciples can already do. Folks who feel daunted by discipleship need to hear that sometimes faith can be pretty ordinary. That's what Jesus means, I think, by saying that if they had the faith even of a mustard seed, they could uproot and move a mulberry tree -- that it really doesn't take all that much faith to be, well, faithful. Even the simplest things done in faith can have a huge impact.

And so Jesus tells his disciples -- both then and now -- that we've got all that we need to be faithful, and that being faithful, finally, is about recognizing all the God-given opportunities just to show up and do what needs to be done:

- doing our work
- caring for those in need
- protecting the vulnerable
- reaching out to the lonely
- befriending the friendless
- keeping the world going
- contributing to the common good.

It's all the ordinary stuff we do all the time and, taken together and blessed by God, it's pretty extraordinary. (Dear Working Preacher website for October 6, 2013)

God will give you the faith needed for whatever comes. If it is for a great heroic feat, then the strength will come. If it is to endure a long thankless task, the endurance will come.

What do we do then? Turn to our God each and every moment for each and every day. Whether the task be extraordinary or ordinary we do it in faith, and by the help of God we do it well. Amen