

Scripture Reading:
Luke 17:5-10

Immeasurable Faith?

Today's scriptures have a plea in them. A plea that more than a few of us might understand whether we want to or not. Did you catch it? Please God 'increase our faith.'

I've been there. I've laid in my bed at night asking for more faith, or more hope, or more trust... less anxiety, less worry, less desire to control that which I cannot.

When the apostles ask this of Jesus he responds with a rather odd analogy, as Jesus often does. But it seems to me that whether it is sarcastic or literal what Jesus is trying to say is faith can't be measured like that. If we have faith the size of a mustard seed we have faith. He seems to be saying if you are even asking for more then that means you have faith and that means you have enough. After all when Jesus chooses a mustard seed he intentionally chooses the smallest of seeds. Jesus states that with that size of faith you can uproot and replant a mulberry bush - which according to the commentaries I read, mulberry bushes simply do not replant - especially in the sea.

"When it comes to faith (Greek *pistis*, may also be translated as trust, confidence, commitment), Jesus suggests that size does not matter; even a seed of faith holds tree-like potential. Jesus' followers can live and act on the basis of whatever faith is theirs, no matter how small or insignificant it seems. We might recall that even the immeasurable reign of God is compared to a mustard seed (Luke 13:19)."¹ SUC folks know that scripture well because that is the scripture we focussed on to carry out the Centrepoint project. The smallest amount of faith when planted will expand, grow, influence and care for all the world. The point seems to be don't worry about your amount of faith, rather what your faith is in. And then live into that faith.

"throughout Luke's Gospel, the closest followers of Jesus reveal their own "mixed" levels of faith. On one hand, they have left homes and jobs and families in order to follow Jesus. It has not been easy, as they have encountered hostility from many who oppose Jesus (Luke 11:53; 13:31; 16:14). Still they have stuck around, even for this final journey toward Jerusalem, and even when they have received a warning of what is to come (Luke 9:22)."²

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3028

² IBID

I think some in this room might relate more than you might first think. Take it out of the context of the biblical days, journeying towards Jerusalem as disciples. Think about your own real life. You have been or are going through trials, broken relationships, illness, job insecurities and the list goes on and yet here you are with your 'level of faith.' Some of you find your faith strengthened in times of trials and others find it wavering. That is why I love the communal aspect of faith we hear from Timothy. Starting with verse 5 he says "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. 6 For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; 7 for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

The faith of our mothers, fathers, grandmothers, church communities and beyond are something we carry with us. It is a part of us. The request is not a singular request but rather a communal one "increase OUR faith" plea the disciples. Faith continues not in a spirit of cowardice but in a spirit of power and love. Faith is risk, its action, its following through.

Karoline Lewis writes "This bid of the disciples. *asks* -- can I really do this? This request, that, if we are honest, rings a bit of desperation, tapping into our doubts, our fears, our longings when it comes to wondering, what is our faith good for? Does our faith get us anywhere? Is our faith worth anything?... *This is the kind of plea* that originates from those moments where only the belief in the power of God can truly make a difference. Those times when our own faith is on the line -- both because it is being challenged but also because we have never needed it more.

And the request has an even deeper pathos when we are reminded just a few verses later that Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem (Luke 17:11).

Increase our faith. Please, Jesus. We need it more than ever.

"Increase our faith" indeed comes from fretting and not trusting... (Psalm 37:1-9). It's the appeal born out of anxiety. It's the wish that gives witness to our uncertainties. It's the petition that points to our discomfort with perplexities.

It gives voice to those times in our lives when we just need Jesus to make things easier, when we need some answers... It gives voice to our ultimate idolatry when it comes to God -- certainty. We want to know exactly what will happen and we want to believe if we can muster up enough faith it will get us what we want.

Lewis continues What do we imagine that more faith will get us? An easier life? Less pain? More certainty? Effortless answers?

That's the rub of this question. Were it only about a request for faith, that would be one thing, complicated, but more manageable. Clearly, having faith is better than not having it... Our lives, our culture, our society depend on and feed off of quantifiers, with usually more being better. And perhaps the fact that faith is not quantifiable is one of the most difficult things to accept about it.

But maybe hidden in that immeasurability is the promise of this text. And maybe the mixed response of Jesus points to this very truth -- that faith in God works something like God's love for us -- immeasurable...and incalculable. God does not measure our faith any more than God can, than we can, measure God's love for us."³

So what is faith if it is not measurable? Audrey West writes "Faith is persistence in reaching out to Jesus (Luke 5:17-26) and trusting in Jesus' power and authority (7:1-10). Faith is responding with love to forgiveness received (7:44-50), not letting fear get the upper hand (8:22-25), and being willing to take risks that challenge the status quo (8:43-48). Faith is giving praise to God (17:11-19), having confidence in God's desire for justice (18:1-8), and being willing to ask Jesus for what we need (18:35-43)."⁴

I have discovered that faith most often is found in the courage to risk and trust, that when I seek to do the best for all creation, I will have peace knowing that God's love is forever with me. That all matter of things shall be well. God does not go about measuring our faith, so even if it is simply the size of a minute mustard seed Let us live out our faith together because that faith is within us as individuals and community knowing Gods love is surrounds us every step of the way.

Have Faith.
Amen.

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4725>

⁴ IBID