

**17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – October 2, 2022**  
Luke 17:5-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I wonder what you think about when you hear Jesus' famous saying about having faith the size of a mustard seed. Do you comfort yourself with the knowledge that even what little bit of faith you might have is more than enough? Do you imagine that if you could just manage to conjure up some measure of belief in God, however tentative, however wavering, that you will have done your part and God will do the rest? Or are you, like me, maybe a little discouraged by this passage because you have never been able to order a tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the ocean? Imagine the quick work our dedicated gardening crew here at Grace would have with that kind of faith! Imagine the landscaping we could do! I hear Jesus saying here to his disciples, if you had any faith at all you would be doing amazing things with it. The implication seems to be that they obviously *don't* have even the tiniest *speck* of faith. That leads me to conclude that the same could also be said for me. And if that weren't bad enough already, what the heck is going on at the end of this Gospel reading? We're supposed to think of ourselves as "worthless slaves"? I thought Jesus was supposed to be loving and affirming.

Faith is the theme that runs through each of our readings once again this morning. I want to lift up aspects of faith found throughout our readings today in order to try to make sense of this difficult Gospel reading and give us a way forward. But before I do that, I need to clarify something important about what the Bible means by "faith." Faith in the Bible is always connected to the idea of trust. We can miss that in English because we have three different words in English to express one Greek word, and our word faith cannot be turned into a verb the way it is in Greek. In other words, we can't "faith" something or someone. In English we can "believe" or we can "trust" a person or a message. Unfortunately, we tend to opt for "believe," so that faith in God ends up meaning simply that we believe God exists. Of course believing that God exists has to be the starting point of faith. You can't trust God if you don't believe God exists. But biblical faith is about trusting that not only that God is there, but that God cares for us, that God is in the process of rescuing us from powers beyond our control so that we can live lives of integrity, or to repeat that phrase I'm so fond of repeating from last week's second reading, so that we might have "life that really is life." So then, biblical faith, faith as the Bible understand and uses the word, is trust in the promises of God that leads to life. With that understanding of faith, let's turn to our readings.

The first thing I want to bring out from our readings is that faith is hard. The disciples asking Jesus to increase their faith does not come out of the blue. It comes after Jesus warns them that following him, trusting in him, will be difficult, that there will be times when their trust will waver, and that their wavering trust can make others lose faith. Then he talks about the importance of forgiveness, even of repeated offenses – seven times a day, he says – if the offender repents. That's when the disciples say, "increase our faith." It's them recognizing that they can't do what Jesus asks, or even that in their current state they don't *want*. And I get that. It's *hard* to forgive people who have wronged you, even for us who come here every week to confess our sins before God and receive God's forgiveness. In my experience, church communities are no better at forgiving than is the world at large. In fact, we're mostly *terrible* at forgiving one another. And it may be that our awareness of the necessity to forgive compounds the problem. Knowing the importance of forgiveness shines a bright light on our failures to forgive. It's embarrassing and discouraging. And then there is the problem that endless forgiveness can look a lot like enabling bad behavior, which is surely why Jesus connects repentance with forgiveness. There comes a point when one has to say,

as John the Baptist said to the crowds that came to be baptized, “bear fruits worthy of repentance,” in other words, give evidence that your repentance is not merely manipulation. So faith is hard, and as Paul writes in our second reading, it will be accompanied by suffering.

Second, faith is a resource in troubled times. We are not left helpless in the suffering that accompanies faith, or in any other suffering we face. The anguish expressed in our first reading this morning is palpable also in recent events near and far, from the escalating conflict in Ukraine to the devastating destruction in central Florida in the wake of Hurricane Ian. The lament of Habakkuk, “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? ... Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contentions arise...” – these could easily be the prayers of hurricane victims who have lost homes and loved ones, of the victims of the brutal war in Ukraine, and even of Russians now suffering the consequences of their dictator’s misguided, barbaric, and idolatrous aggression. Or, to bring things closer to home, they could also be your prayer if you are suffering from cancer, or heart failure, or depression, or a broken relationship. We might be tempted to respond to these difficulties with despair or rage. Or, in the case of violence or corruption, we could be tempted into complicity with evil and using it to our advantage. To this our psalm counsels us to “be still before the Lord and wait patiently,” and not to be “provoked by the one who prospers, the one who succeeds in evil schemes,” – in other words, to have faith; to trust that God is working to make things right even when there seems to be no shred of evidence to that effect.

So doesn’t that bring us back to the disciples’ request, “increase our faith?” – add to our faith, make us stronger believers, give us confidence right now that God’s promises are true and trustworthy? What Jesus is getting at, I think, in his enigmatic response about the mustard seed, is that faith is not a magic infusion that special, holy people get, which transforms them suddenly into miracle-working saints. The disciples were asking for an easy solution to the difficulties of faith and Jesus was telling them that that’s not how it works. Faith is a response to God’s promise that starts small like a mustard seed and grows and develops in the midst of suffering. Faith happens in the struggle against the competing promises of the world and in that struggle it reorients us away from our instinctive selfishness and aligns our will with God’s will, the God who in Jesus gave up self-interest for the sake of the world in order to conquer the powers of sin, death, and evil by living through them and dying as their victim, and then, by doing what only God can do, by raising him from the dead as a new creation.

The disciples asking Jesus to increase their faith is like asking someone you love to “increase your love.” Love, when it happens, does so in the encounter of one person with another, something that grows and deepens in the ongoing interactions with each other, through good times and through bad times. The same is true of our faith in God. Faith, when it happens, does so in the encounter with God that we are promised when we gather in God’s name around word and sacrament, or when siblings in Christ remind one another of God’s promises for Jesus sake and encourage and support one another as agents of God’s love. It grows and deepens in that ongoing encounter that we call the life of faith, through good times and through bad times.

What about the “worthless slave” thing? Turns out it’s a bad translation. Better would be, “we are servants who are owed nothing for our service,” in other words, how we act in the world proceeds naturally and inevitably from who we are. The good we do we do not because we should, or because we expect a reward, but because we can’t help it. It’s who we are. It’s what we find we *want* to do as our wills are aligned with God’s. As Luther once put it, “it is impossible to separate works from faith, quit as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.” May it be so for us. May our encounter with God ignite in us faith that burns with a bold and active love. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.