

Sermon for 10-6-19
Scriptures -- Luke 17:5-10 & 2 Timothy 1:1-14
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The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"ⁱ

Increase our faith??? It's not an everyday question, right? What are they really asking?

They're saying "**increase** our faith," which implies that faith is not something brand new to them. Faith is something they already have, but they want more of it.

The apostles already love Jesus, and trust him, enough to leave behind their homes and livelihoods and follow him wherever he goes. That's no small thing. How many of us would do it?

At this point in the Gospel story, the apostles already have love and trust and belief and courage -- and we've got those too. But the apostles have one thing we don't. They've got Jesus standing right in front of them!

So what, then, are they asking Jesus to give them when they say, "Increase our faith!"???

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When I was in college, I went through an utterly typical period of questioning, interrogating everything I'd ever been taught, including my religious beliefs.

Luckily I was raised in a church and a tradition where asking questions, and challenging myself and those around me, was not only tolerated but encouraged. I was never taught that questions were dangerous. I was never taught that doubts were character flaws. I was taught that nothing I could ever say or do would cause God to stop loving me.

Being shaped in this loving and affirming environment was one of the greatest blessings of my life thus far; and I hope and pray that our children and youth have a similar experience.

Nevertheless -- during college I wondered, and questioned, and doubted. Not the existence of God, or the love of Christ, of the movement of the Holy Spirit... I knew those were true because, somehow, I could **feel** them in the marrow of my bones, in the warmth of my blood, in the beat of my heart.

But in that environment, where I was learning so much so quickly about so many things -- where knowledge was like nourishment and my mind was constantly ravenous -- my biggest question was this:

How can something be True, capital-T-True, if I can't explain it logically? How can something be True if I can't define it neatly, or articulate it systematically with a fully annotated bibliography?

To be clear, there are people who can do this -- theologians and evangelists who devote their lives to the work of explaining and demonstrating the Gospel Truth, answering every conceivable question, countering every challenge with an intellectually robust defense... but that's not for me. I am **not** a systematic theologian -- thankfully, God called me to a different vocation.

Anyway, during my junior year, we got a new chaplain on campus. He was great; all the chaplains were great. I loved them all. Our new chaplain, Pastor Rich, very quickly perceived something about my personal struggle with questions of faith and doubt. One day after worship he gave me a small decorative print, with a colorful border framing these words: "Faith is not *being sure*. Faith is *not being sure*, but betting with your last cent."

I still have that little print, tucked away between the pages of the well-worn study Bible that I lugged back and forth from my dorm room, to the chapel, to religion classes and Bible studies during those four years.

"Faith is not being sure, but betting with your last cent."

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When the apostles said, "Increase our faith!" to Jesus, I think they were asking for the wrong thing. I think the apostles wanted iron-clad certainty, unquestionable proof, complete erasure of all their doubts. In short, they wanted something Jesus never intended to give them (or us).

Listen to his response: "If you had 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."ⁱⁱ

Jesus of Nazareth was not a Christian apologist, or a systematic theologian. He was a prophet, a shepherd, a healer. He was a teacher, and a reconciler. He was a redeemer. He was the savior of the world.

And the faith he desired, the faith he planted and cultivated in his followers, the faith to which he calls us even now, is not grand or elaborate or thoroughly pre-meditated... it's tiny, and simple, and humble, and it has power beyond our wildest imaginations. That little seed of faith, planted by God within you and me, has the power to move mountains. It has the power to change our lives and the world!

I think this is what Paul meant when he wrote to his friend Timothy of the "faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now... lives in you."ⁱⁱⁱ Paul writes from far away to encourage Timothy, this young fellow evangelist, to strengthen him and tell him not to give up but to keep going, to keep walking in the Way of unfolding faith and to trust in the process. He says to Timothy, "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit..."^{iv} Paul doesn't know what Timothy's future holds, but he knows that Timothy's got that little seed of faith, that "good treasure" that will grow and evolve and make and remake Timothy into a new man, one who lives fully and faithfully.

Faith doesn't mean everything in life becomes easy. Faith doesn't mean eternal sunshine and sweetness. To have faith, to live faithfully, is to see ourselves and each other and the entire Creation as exactly what we are meant to be -- beloved of God, and called by God. Faith doesn't take some kind of superhuman effort on

our part; and if it did, it would be more about us and what we can do, than about God and *what God can do*. Faith just takes a bit of trust, an honest desire to walk in the way of Christ, and a willingness to **hold on** -- to hold onto that little seed God has planted in each one of us, to protect it and cultivate it and lean into its hold on our lives.

My friends, we should not fret if we are unable to do something Jesus never asked us to do -- set aside all questions, and crush any doubts. None of us knows what our future holds, and none of us is free from fear. But God has provided for us. All we need is a little kernel to hold onto, a tiny seed of trust and truth. If we cherish it, and nurture it, and love it well, then over time that tiny seed will grow and blossom into a life rich with meaning and wholeness and light -- a faithful life.

Because faith is not being sure, but betting with your last cent. Amen.

ⁱ Luke 17:5

ⁱⁱ Luke 17:6

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Timothy 1:5

^{iv} 2 Timothy 1:14