

## **“Increase Our Faith!”**

**Text: Luke 17:5-10**

“*Increase our faith*”, the apostles asked Jesus, these followers, these disciples who had given up everything – their trade, their family, their personal riches, their whole world for following Jesus and found themselves stumbling in skepticism and lost in bewilderment. They think faith is something they can super-size and they just want more of it. Earlier in this passage, Jesus had not only warned them about making others stumble but also instructed them that they must forgive those who wrong them over and over again.

“If I just had a super-duper faith....” Perhaps I wouldn’t have so many questions or doubts or fear. Perhaps all my prayers would be answered. Perhaps I would be more involved in the church or in the community where I live. Perhaps I would handle things better and life would be different. If I just had a magnanimous super-sized faith! “I think most of us have struggled with faith at some point in our lives. No wonder the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith and wonder who in the world can live up to Jesus’ expectations.

If one of you walks into my office and asks, “Kim, increase my faith!” I will be thrilled! Readily, I will invite you for tea, open up a conversation about faith, do a bible study about it and brainstorm what faith means to you. Jan Pound said “invite them to attend the Lectionary Group!” Yes - I will engage you with talks on your faith journey and how you might deepen your faith. And of course, I will get you to sign up to serve in the many ministries we have here at Bells Corners. Wow! Sounds like a very good plan. Any takers here?

But not Jesus! He brushes the disciples’ request off. He did not indulge their question even if we know that more faith won’t hurt. No hints. No tricks. Not even much encouragement. Only a point-blank answer that makes them wonder what it meant. “Guys – you don’t need to have faith the size of a baseball stadium! If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, a teeny tiny almost invisible mustard seed – then you could say to this giant mulberry tree, “be uprooted and planted in the sea” and it would obey you!” What is Jesus trying to convey in this parabolic accent? Faith the size of a mustard seed? How could a minute-grain of a mustard seed be enough to uproot something huge like a tree? How could that size of a faith move something so big? You must be kidding, Jesus! But that’s exactly what Jesus meant – faith doesn’t have to be super-duper, huge or overly heroic. One does not need more or less faith– what you only need is a mustard-seed faith! Susan Young enthused us with her understanding by saying that the mustard seed is symbolic of a potential rather than power. The potential in each one of us – of what we can do when we take on an opportunity to grow and become an agent of transformation. That potential can spread like a wildfire!

What then, is faith? Is it something we hold dear in our heart like conviction or hope? Is faith cerebral that exists only in the mind? Is it a doctrine or a dogma, a teaching that is handed down from our foreparents to us? Does faith always involve doing? Is it the bedrock of relationship like saying “I have faith and trust in a loving God who looks after my needs. Is faith the opposite of unbelief, doubt and fear? Peggy Aitchison carried with her the meaning of faith in an acronym that I find inspiring—forsaking all I trust him!

“Faith”, according to Rev. Dr. David Lose, “isn’t an idea, it’s a muscle. And the more we use that muscle, the stronger it gets. It’s all the ordinary stuff we do all the time and, taken together and blessed by God, it’s pretty darn extraordinary. This is everyday faith -- the ordinary, extraordinary faith that we’re invited to practice day in and day out.”

One day, a frustrated person said to her minister, “I find it difficult to believe some of the statements in the creed that we recite. How can I stand and affirm what I don’t really believe?” The minister replied, “Just keep saying it. Eventually, it may come to you. Until then, the congregation will keep believing for you until you are ready to believe it yourself.”

Faith certainly defies definition. But no matter how you define faith, I am certain that faith is not a figment of imagination, or an intellectual achievement, or even the result of doing good or spiritual practices. Faith is a passion, a living fire that ignites us to move to a positive direction. Faith is the twin sister of trust - trust that leans on the steadfast love and new mercies of God. It is trusting in the One who journeys with us through the twists and turns of life. Faithfulness means that no matter where we go, no matter what circumstances we face we do so in relationship with the One who created, loves, sustains, and redeems us.

The next question is this: Is it possible then to increase our faith? The Methodist Bishop Will Willimon has a wonderful explanation to this question: “I think Jesus might have been saying, “You want increased faith? Then keep at being faithful.” Put another way, “You get more faith not by closing your eyes, trying real hard to feel or to believe something. More faith comes through faithful living. Just do it; your faith will be increased, not as a personal achievement, but as a gift of God.” God loves us enough to give us rituals, sacraments, practices, habits that – in the doing – God graciously uses to increase our faith. Being a Christian is not simply believing a set of ideas; it’s taking up a way of life and, in living this way of life, we are brought closer to God, that is, our faith is increased.”

Let me tell you a story about faith:

There was a man who got lost in the desert. After wandering around for a long time his throat became very dry, about that time he saw a little shack in the distance. He made his way over to the shack and found a water pump with a small jug of water and a note. The note read: "pour all the water into the top of the pump to prime it, if you do this you will get all the water you need". Now the man had a choice to make, if he trusted the note and poured the water in and it worked he would have all the water he needed. If it didn't work he would still be thirsty and he might die. Or he could choose to drink the water in the jug and get immediate satisfaction, but it might not be enough and he still might die. After thinking about it the man decided to risk it. He poured the entire jug into the pump and began to work the handle, at first nothing happened and he got a little scared but he kept going and water started coming out. So much water came out he drank all he wanted, took a shower, and filled all the containers he could find. Because he was willing to give up momentary satisfaction, he got all the water he needed. Now the note also said: after you have finished, please refill the jug for the next traveller." The man refilled the jug and added to the note: "Please prime the pump, believe me it works"!

Faith spreads like a wildfire! Even the simplest things done in faith can have a huge impact and can spread rapidly. Faith, no matter how small it is, is powerful. It only takes one small candle to light a dark room. It only takes a pinch of salt to make food tasty. It only takes small acts of love, kindness and justice to bring about radical changes in the world. It only takes a young Greta Thunberg to address a giant issue like climate change. We live by faith not because we have enough faith but because we have faith, even the size of a mustard seed, planted in our heart, mind and spirit. That is all we need. Jesus calls us to live the faith we already have to face the daily challenges in life, to find the inner confidence, to try new possibilities, to realize that the body of Christ is broken for us and the cup of grace is shared by all.

Today, our sisters and brothers all over the world gather around tables of grace and blessings - not a table of holy perfection, but one that gets rearranged frequently and is never completely, fully, finally set. This is what I call a table of hope. That is the dream of God for us. It's the vision that we all hunger for. No wonder our practice of faith draws us back, again and again, to this table of plenty where we celebrate God's love and to remember the potential of a mustard seed faith taught to us by Jesus himself.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

## Sources that helped me with my sermon:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/stories-about-Faith-Works.asp>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/2761> keeping it simple – a reflection on Luke 17:5-10

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/october-6-2013.html#Sample>, Kathryn Matthews Huey

<sup>4</sup> September 29, 2013 by Will Willimon, <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/featured/doing-faith-until-you-have-it>

<sup>5</sup> David Lose <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2773>, Everyday Faith

<sup>6</sup> <http://interruptingthesilence.com/2010/10/03/supersize-my-faith-please-luke-175-10/>. Michael Marsh, Oct 3, 2010

<sup>7</sup> BCUC Lectionary Group