

Increase Our Faith

“Increase our faith!” Isn’t that the cry of every Christian in every place at every time? Is there any one of you who thinks they have enough faith? What a great statement for those apostles to make to Jesus! And what a disappointing answer! It’s really no answer at all. Basically, Jesus tells his disciples straight out that they have less faith than the smallest mustard seed, because they aren’t able to make a tree uproot itself. I don’t know about you, but that response would leave me scratching my head, disappointed. Why can’t Jesus be more encouraging, or at least more direct?

The context doesn’t help. Just before this, Jesus had just told his disciples that they must forgive the sins of others more times than seemed humanly possible. No wonder they wanted more faith! Instead, they are reminded of just how little faith they have. Jesus goes on to say that they shouldn’t expect any reward for simply doing what they are supposed to do. Instead of giving more faith, Jesus reminds them of their duty and practically calls them worthless.

When I was rector of the Episcopal church in Burlington, I often met with a lectionary study group that was mostly Lutheran pastors. I was amused when this reading came up and one of them immediately referred to an earlier parable in Luke, where Jesus describes a master who returns from a wedding banquet, finds the servants ready, and proceeds to serve *them*. Just the opposite of this morning’s reading. It’s a classic preaching maneuver, swiftly moving from Scripture you don’t like to a passage you do. I was amused but unimpressed, because I think preachers are called to wrestle with whatever scripture is put before them.

So what do we do with this? Is it really about faith versus duty? Well, I would say faith *and* duty; they are not opposed to one another. In fact, one can hardly do one’s duty without faith that it is the right thing to do. The book selected for the latest Trinity Reads is an excellent illustration of that.

This afternoon at 4:00 a number of us will gather to discuss *From Red Earth: A Rwandan Story of Healing and Forgiveness* by Denise Uwimana. It’s a difficult and powerful book that describes the horrors of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, when the Hutu people attempted to annihilate the Tutsi people. It also describes the remarkable reconciliation which followed, which is very much a story of Christian faith. One passage that really stopped me was in the middle of the killings when Denise, a Tutsi, asked a Hutu couple why they risked their lives to help the Tutsi when everyone else joined in the killing. The man said, “Ever since I found forgiveness of my sins at the cross, I vowed never to betray Jesus again.”

“Ever since I found forgiveness of my sins at the cross, I vowed never to betray Jesus again.” That man had found faith, and because he had found faith, he found the strength and courage to do his duty, helping those who were in great danger. Like the slaves in today’s parable, he would say, “I have only done what I ought to have done,” even at the risk of his life. Because he knew that he was forgiven, he was willing to do the work of Jesus without counting the cost.

I do pray that none of us ever experiences what the Rwandans went through. Yet tests of faith come all the time. We always feel we need an increase of faith. One of the best responses I've ever heard to someone who worries that they don't have enough faith is a simple one: decide what you would do if you did have faith, and do it. What's remarkable is that by acting as though you had faith, faith appears.

Maybe that's what Jesus is getting at. By speaking in such hyperbole about a mustard seed moving a mulberry tree, he is essentially saying that measuring faith is a waste of time. What's the point of trying to quantify something that will never be enough? Act out of duty – not duty that expects a reward, but duty that acts because it is the right thing to do.

I realize that duty is not a popular word these days. It carries overtones of obligation and submission to authority. It seems too confining, too thoughtless. It rankles against our cultural values of self-expression and individualism. And it has often been abused. Most of the Hutus in 1994 would have told that Hutu couple that it was their duty to destroy the Tutsi. However, they were obedient to a different authority, to a man who had suffered and died so that others could live, so that *they* could live. Once they had experienced the forgiveness of their sins at the cross, how could they ever do anything that would betray Jesus?

My Lutheran colleague was right in mentioning the earlier parable, where Jesus says that we need to be ready for him so that we can greet him with joy. Yet we also need today's parable, which sits in tension with the other one. Today Jesus makes clear that being ready does not mean passively waiting. To have faith is to continue to work for the coming kingdom of God, using the gifts God has given us. We must recognize them as *gifts*, not birthrights, not something we have earned. So in using them we should not expect any reward – other than to live in the presence of Christ. For my part, that would be enough. I can think of nothing better than to be surrounded by the loving presence of God. As long as I can hold onto that, I won't have to worry about the size of my faith. I can just get on with it and do the work God has given me to do. May you, too, find peace in doing the work God has given *you* to do, the peace of God which passes all understanding. May it always guard *your* hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

[Pentecost 17: Luke 17:5-10. See also Luke 12:35.]