

March 8, 2020
Second Sunday in Lent

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What Kind of Faith is Ours?

Hebrews 11:17-22, 12:1-2; Luke 17:1-6

Text: *"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'"* Luke 17:5

"The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'" Who among us has not echoed that plea? I certainly have... haven't you? It's alright to say so, indeed it is important to say so. According to a recent Gallup poll, a great number of Americans stay away from church because they think their faith is inadequate, feeling that the church is filled with people who have total confidence in God, whose faith never wavers or weakens, but is always strong, sincere and secure.

I would respond to that: forget it! The truth is that many, probably most of us, have had experiences that have shaken our faith. With or without such times of testing, most of us encounter highs and lows in our believing. Some days we have faith "enough to move mountains"—and some days we barely have enough to get out of bed. Even on the good days, few of us are satisfied with the sturdiness or the maturity of our faith. We wish the roots went deeper—and were better nourished. And so, when we come to worship and hear how the disciples said to Jesus, "Increase our faith!"—we feel like chiming in, because we want that too! Increase our faith!

Before going any further, perhaps we should clarify more precisely what we are talking about. The word "faith" gets used in different ways, to mean different things. A lot of people in the aforementioned Gallup poll seemed to equate faith with accepting certain teachings, or agreeing to certain propositions as being "true." They felt that their doubts or their skepticism regarding some of those beliefs, made them unfit or unwelcome, as far as the church is concerned. There are theological convictions that the Christian tradition has identified as being important. Our Reformed Calvinist tradition has been especially keen on trying to articulate these convictions and their implications.

We have gathered together no less than 12 Creeds and Confessions, ranging from the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, down to more recent statements of faith which, taken as a whole, are said to express "the essential tenets of the Reformed faith." These propositional statements matter because not only is "truth" at stake, but theological convictions have a way of influencing both the life and work of the Church, as well as our personal attitudes and actions. They can elevate or degrade us, depending on what is asserted and accepted.

Yet in the Bible, and especially in the ministry of Jesus, when we encounter the word “faith” or its twin “belief,” there is reference to something other than the affirmation of mere propositions or the acceptance of doctrines. That something else is “trust”—trust in the presence and power of the God of love, who wants a relationship with human beings and who is responsive to their needs. As important as the historic Creeds and Confessions of the Church are for us, sometimes they get in the way of this more basic trust.

So, I wish to speak directly for a moment to those who think that having faith means “signing on the dotted line”... or that they are ready to swallow in one gulp everything in the Apostles’ Creed, or in the Westminster Confession of Faith, or our Confession of 1967. That is not what we are talking about. When the disciples said to Jesus “Increase our faith!” they weren’t having difficulty with the doctrine of the Atonement or doubting the inspiration of their Scriptures. Jesus had been speaking to them about the necessity of forgiveness. He told them that their forgiveness was to be unlimited.

The disciples found that hard to do—as we do! So they said, “Increase our faith!” They were seeking help in living this magnanimous but difficult and demanding way of life. What the disciples wanted more of was the kind of faith they saw in Jesus himself. They had been with him for a year, or two or three, and knew how confident he was of God’s grace. They had seen him practice forgiveness—had observed how aware he was of a dimension beyond the world of sight and sound. They noticed how he emerged from his prayers with a renewed sense of who he was, and what he was to do.

They sensed how his trust in God influenced the way he treated others, strengthened him in meeting the demands of his ministry, and made him confident, even now, on the way to what they all sensed would be a decisive confrontation with his enemies. When the disciples said “Increase our faith!” they were seeking the wherewithal to live the life about which he had been teaching them, the life that he himself represented, the life to which he was calling them. Isn’t that what you and I want, as well? “Increase our faith!” When we echo the request of the ancient apostles, it is not for help in giving assent to some creed or doctrine we want.

Aren’t we rather wanting to learn to live as Jesus did, with his confidence in the presence of a good and gracious God, and to die as he did, trusting that love we have experienced in life will not abandon us in death? One may have reservations about this or that doctrinal assertion as a Presbyterian and still make it through life. What you cannot do is live anything resembling a Christ-like life, or die with anything like a Christ-like hope, without something like a Christ-like faith.

So how do we increase our capacity to live—and die—with such a faith? I offer you a few suggestions. To start with, we need to build on the faith we already possess. Let’s take a moment to look more closely at the response Jesus gave to his disciples, back there on the road. It requires a quick linguistic detour. Remember how Jesus began? “If you had faith...” he said. Does that sound to you like a reprimand? It did to me, at first, but one biblical scholar, Fred Craddock, has convinced me that it is the opposite. He says that “the Greek language (in which the Gospels were written) has two types of ‘if’ clauses.”

There are those which express a condition contrary to fact: for example, “If I were you.” I am not you, so such an “if” statement is contrary to fact. But there are “if” statements which express a truth according to fact: for example, “If we were worshipping.” We are worshipping at the moment, so this “if” statement corresponds with fact and reality. The scholar suggests

that “the words ‘if you had faith’ are of this second type and could be translated, ‘if you had faith—and you do.’” So he goes on, “Jesus’ response is not a reprimand for an absence of faith, but an affirmation of faith (which the disciples) have, and an invitation to live out the full possibilities of that faith.”

Like the disciples, you have faith too, or the chances are you wouldn’t be here this morning. Whatever the extent of your faith, build on it! Instead of berating yourself because you don’t have greater faith, be grateful for the faith you do have and realize that “Rome wasn’t built in a day.” For most of us, a mature faith is more a “process” than a “possession.” Be patient with yourself, and give your faith time to grow.

My second suggestion is to practice living by faith. Understand that faith increases with faithfulness. That’s not double-talk because faith grows as you exercise it, like a muscle or a special skill. Put whatever faith you have to work. Jesus said that, even if your faith is tiny and fragile like a “mustard seed,” God can make it grow into a tall tree. Your part is to put whatever faith you have to work. Like Abraham, take some risks of faith. Have you wanted to be less preoccupied with possessions, with material things? Risk giving some of it away—like we have been challenged to do again in this season of Lent so effectively by our Generosity Team. Have you been afraid to do something you want passionately to do? Risk doing it! Faith grows as you practice it—which is one of the reasons why what we are doing right now is so important, for example joining a Small Group for Bible study during Lent, and coming to the Holy Week services.

As Episcopal preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Worship is the ongoing practice of faith, and not only the practice, but the actual experience of it. Worship is how the people of God practice their reliance on the Lord.” We come here and sing hymns of praise; even though we may not feel like praising God, we do it. We pray and only briefly, we pay attention to God. We listen to Scripture and sermons and experience (hopefully) a living Lord, beckoning us to enter, to follow, to listen, to learn, to live, to hope, and to trust.”

An anthem encourages us on many Sundays to rest “safe in Jesus’ arms” and—if only for a moment—we ease up, let go, fall back, and thus we rest and are fed. Why worship? Because worship is the one place where, week after week, faith is not exercised but experienced. In the words of one of our Presbyterian hymns, “Here are symbols to remind us, of our life-long need of grace; here are table, font and pulpit; here the cross has central place.” Here, also, are faith companions, which leads me to suggestion #3: realize that the journey of faith need not be, and should not be, a solitary venture. That is why our Lenten Small Groups are so helpful. You have companions on the road—stay close to them. Remember that you don’t have to do all the believing by yourself. And all the while they will encourage you, helping your faith grow.

The Book of Acts tells us that, in the very first Christian community, “all who believed were together... and day by day, the Lord added to their number...” It wasn’t a coincidence: faith increases within a community of faith. Faith nearly always diminishes when you try to go it alone. Our growth in faith, even our ability to believe, sometimes depends on our being with other believers. The author of The Letter to the Hebrews knew this well and so encouraged us: “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also run with perseverance the race that is set before us...” The text goes on to speak of the greatest of all persons of faith—Jesus himself.

There came a time, after his death and resurrection, when Jesus became the object of faith. What separates the Church from other religions is the belief, as Paul puts it, that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” But before Jesus was the “object of faith,” he was the example of faith. And he still is. He is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him, endured the cross...” Who better to whom to listen, and from whom to learn, if we wish to “increase our faith”?

Of that faith, a wise preacher named Barbara Brown Taylor has also written: “It is not a well-fluffed nest, or a well-defended castle, high on a hill. It is more like a rope bridge over a scenic gorge, sturdy, but swinging back and forth, with plenty of light and air, but precious little to hang on to—except the stories you have heard: that it is the best and only way across; that it is possible; that it will bear your weight. All you have to do,” Taylor says, “is believe in the bridge more than you believe in the gorge. Fortunately, you do not have to believe in it all by yourself. There are others to believe it with you, and even some to believe it for you, when your own belief wavers.”

And Rev. Brown concludes: “Some of them have crossed the bridge ahead of you, and are waiting on the other side. You can talk to them if you’d like, as you start your own journey across the gorge.” Of all those on the “other side,” whom better to talk to, listen to, and look to, than Jesus—“the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”?