

Even a Little Faith

Dr. D. William McIvor

October 7, 2007 — World Communion Sunday

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Luke 17.5-10 (NRSV)

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” The Lord replied, “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.

“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

Introduction

I would guess that you reacted to the morning lesson very much like I reacted a couple of weeks ago when I began to prepare this sermon. It doesn’t feel like a very positive message. We do not like thinking of ourselves as slaves. This brutal and violent image in the American consciousness raises our hackles because we are steeped in a tradition of personal liberty. Furthermore, we don’t like the image of God in this parable. We’ve been told a thousand times that God is love but the master, who represents God in this parable, does not seem very loving. What sense can we make of this?

Keep in mind that the passage is really trying to teach us about faith. I have my usual two points this morning, the second of which is the obligation of faith. But first let’s talk about the encouragement of faith. This text seeks to encourage our faith.

ONE: The encouragement of faith

The Greek language in which Luke wrote has two kinds of conditional statements: *if—contrary to fact*, and *if—according to fact*. Our text has the second. It could be translated, “if you have faith (and you do) ...”

In other words, Jesus’ response to the apostles asking for faith was not a judgment on their lack of faith but an indirect affirmation of the faith they had and an invitation to live and act in that faith. The apostles asked for more faith and Jesus said that even the small faith they had was effective and powerful beyond their realization. Faith cancels out such words as “impossible” (a tree being uprooted) and “absurd” (planting a tree in the sea). The small faith already theirs could put them in touch with the power of God and nothing is impossible with God.¹

We misunderstand this, I think, because we confuse faith with magic. If I had magical powers, then I could control certain things by the power within me. Several days ago I had a dream. (I recognize the danger of a pastor telling his congregation about his dreams!) I was in a large city —

¹ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year C After Pentecost* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986) 194-195.

I'm not sure exactly where — and I was lost. There just happened to be a 747 there and I decided to fly it home; not just ride in it but fly it from the pilot's seat. Now I can't fly a 747; I can barely fly a kite. So all the while I was getting in the cockpit, starting the engines, and taking off, I was saying to myself *I can't do this, I really can't do this*. I did take off though but I woke up just as I was about to crash. Now you can psychoanalyze that any way you like. But if I could fly a 747, it would be magic: my power to control something and do what I like. Faith is different. Magic presumes some special power in us, but faith presumes that God has power to do God's will in us.

Faith connects us to God's power. Does God want to give us power to fly 747s without training or fling mulberry trees into the ocean? No! The power of God isn't to make us Super-Women or Super-Men, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, and impervious to all hurt except from Kryptonite. The power of God is not to make us super-human but *fully human*. The power of God gives us a reason to be all we can be.

Perhaps I can illustrate this way. I used to belong to Rotary. Perhaps some of you are or have been Rotarians too. Others belong to Kiwanis, Lions, or other service clubs and organizations. I enjoyed being a Rotarian. At the time there were more than a million Rotarians worldwide. Rotary is in more countries than the United Nations. Millions of dollars are raised and many thousands of helpful, caring projects are done each year through Rotary. The Rotary motto is "Service Above Self." That's a worthy and noble ideal that everyone should follow. What Rotary does is good and many other clubs and organizations do good too.

But I wouldn't want to come to the end of my life only having been a Rotarian. You see, Rotary doesn't connect me with anything beyond itself. Rotary doesn't connect me with eternity. Rotary doesn't connect me with the power of God. But faith does.

You say, "Well, Bill, my faith is weak." Yes, so is mine. The apostles' faith was weak too. That's why they asked for more. And Jesus said, "You only need a little to do the impossible — and you have a little faith!" Jesus says the same to you and me, my friend. You have a little faith. If you didn't have a little faith, you probably wouldn't be here today. Lift up your hearts! You *have* faith! And a little faith goes a long way.

Then you say, "Well, if I have faith, why can't I solve things? Why can't I move things around and change things?" Remember that faith isn't magic. The power is not in the faith, the power is in God. Faith in God needs to seek what God wants to do.

Rotary and other similar things are a step ahead of many who have no purpose in their lives. But they are still a giant leap behind the purposes known only in faith. Faith connects us with the purpose of God. When a Sunday school teacher talks to a eight-year-old about Jesus, it isn't just an adult interacting with a child. God is in that. When a parish assistant calls on someone in the hospital, it is not just a visit. It is a divine encounter. When deacons take food to a family in need, it's not just food. It's God's hospitality. When you put money in the offering plate, you are not paying your club dues. You are offering a piece of your finances to God. It takes faith to do all these things. Jesus wants to encourage us even in the little faith that we have.

TWO: The obligation of faith

The encouragement of faith then leads to the obligation of faith. Because faith connects us to God, it comes with an obligation.

The parable about the slave and master outlines that obligation. We never get to the end of

our duty to God. That means there is no retirement plan in Christ's kingdom. There can be no retired Christians. There are no Christian reserve units. Everyone remains on active duty. We can't do our 20-year stint and then retire to leave the work of being a Christian to someone else.

In a few weeks we will be electing elders, deacons, and trustees. Some will be elected for second three-year terms or filling partial terms. But there are no term limits on being disciples. We are all called every day to be active, front-line Christians. Certainly we have differing gifts and abilities. But faith — even the little faith we have — obligates us. If you are hearing my voice, you are called by God and that call continues from now until the day you meet the Lord in heaven.

For me, the best exemplar of this was my mother. My mother did daycare in her home long before daycare centers, long before state licensing, long before most mothers entered the work place. I remember some days, especially in the summer, when there would be 25 to 30 kids around the house from babies to grade-schoolers.

But mostly my mother did our church's nursery. For 35 or 40 years, there she was, almost every Sunday taking care of the babies in the nursery. She did it because she loved babies. But mostly she did it because she loved Jesus. It was not a job for which she received a lot of accolades or recognition. But at her memorial service, there were adults there whom she had taken care of when they were babies and they praised her. But if she had done that job for praise alone, she would have stopped years before. Mostly my mom didn't care about recognition. This was a job that needed doing and she could do it. So she responded to the obligation of faith.

Conclusion

What is your obligation of faith? You have faith. Jesus encourages you in that. Now what does it obligate you to do?

We still need some Sunday school teachers, partly to provide some Sundays off for those already teaching. Talk to Andy Roosa. Some of you have beautiful voices. The Praise Team or Chancel Choir would love to have you join them. Talk to Matthew Guerrieri and offer your voice as a gift to God. And everyone can pray, everyday, in faith. Pray for your pastor, your church leaders, this whole congregation. Pray for healing and wholeness. Pray for the lonely and the hungry and the poor. And as your prayers ascend to God, follow them by going into the world in Jesus' name. For even a little faith can make the impossible happen.