

PENTECOST XIX

The apostles said to Jesus, "Increase our faith." Luke 17:5

If we have read or heard Luke's chapter leading up to this Gospel – which, in fact, we have not, we would understand why the disciples ask for more faith.

Jesus has just finished telling them that drowning in the sea would be preferable to leading a brother or sister astray. He has told them that if someone wrongs them they are to find in themselves unfathomable depths of forgiveness. Discipleship is no walk in the park. No wonder they want more faith!

Can we relate to that? Who among us has not wished, at one time or another, for more faith? Most of us, I dare say.

But I have to confess, and I've said this before, I have not. I seem to have plenty of faith. I've also said before that I take no credit for this. I see my faith as a gift, God's grace, an unearned blessing (that's what grace is, after all, an unearned gift.)

I've wished for plenty of other things: courage, tranquility, patience, insight, patience... I've wished and prayed and hoped and worked for these valuable qualities, as well as for many other more trivial, less admirable things. But I've never asked God for more faith.

And as I understand this saying of Jesus about faith, I think I also understand why I don't feel the need to ask for more. I'll try to explain why.

Last week we had one of our semi-annual clergy gatherings, with a presenter talking about evangelism and church growth. He asked us each to think, and talk to a neighbor about, the activity we are most passionate about in life.

My neighbor was an elderly retired priest I've known forever. I told him that I believed reading was the one activity I couldn't imagine living without. He told me that his passion was picking berries and making jam and jelly. I asked about the berries and he enumerated about a dozen kinds, said he made 120 jars a year and sold them all at the church fair, and that a jar of his jam was a prestige item.

Then the presenter asked us what we would do if we had to choose between the passion we had chosen and Jesus. We did not have to talk about this, sadly, as I would have liked to hear about the choice between Jesus and jam.

But then he said, *you don't have to choose. Your passion is part of your soul, your spiritual footprint, and Jesus is not asking you to choose between your soul and him.*

Afterwards, one of my friends said, *that was nice! How often do we ever hear, follow Jesus and have fun? Follow Jesus and be happy?*

I've got to say I think some evangelicals have it over us in that respect. I think some of them do have the message of Jesus and joy, Jesus and happiness, but that message is mixed with some other notions that seem less realistic and sometimes scary and sometimes, to be blunt, just plain stupid.

But we with our Puritan heritage and complex personalities tend to take a grimmer view of Jesus. We assume, in reading and hearing Scripture, that almost every word contains judgment, every verse sounds a punitive note. Some of us carry wounds from a Bible that has been used to abuse and condemn, not comfort and heal. Some of us have always assumed that Christianity is about guilt. All of that comes between us and a who God loves us, encourages us, and blesses us.

I've been spared all that. But I know how many of you have not, and my ongoing mission here is to offer you a new vision of God and Jesus, and new hope.

The apostles said to Jesus, "Increase our faith."

And Jesus says, *"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."*

We have been conditioned to read this as a reproach. But what if Jesus is not scolding the disciples at all? What if he is speaking words of encouragement and love? What if he's saying, *you don't need more faith, you have plenty!?* Even this much faith is enough!

The disciples fear that they don't have enough faith to carry out their mission. But Jesus changes the question, as is his habit. Now it's not, *how much faith is enough?* But *what is faith for?* He tells the disciples they have the faith they need. Now they must fulfill its purpose by living it.

Understanding the interchange this way helps me understand why I don't pray for more faith. What I pray for is how to use the faith I have, what to do with it, how to live it.

Then there's the second part of the Gospel, about *worthless slaves*, which is far harder to understand in a positive light. Let me give a try.

Jesus lived and taught in a time when there were, indeed, slaves. Certainly a huge fraction of the population of Palestine existed in servitude. Society was rigidly hierarchical; every class and caste and category of people had their place in a stratified society. That was the reality.

Sometimes Jesus' teachings work to upend his ordered society, to shock his hearers into new vision, to radicalize them. Sometimes, however, he uses the existing structures to explain something about the realm of God.

Here, he seems to be saying, *in the realm of God, as in this earthly realm, everyone has a place, a role, a part to play in the great scheme of salvation. My role, and our role, is to serve others. That's what you and I are here to do.*

What if we join my earlier thoughts about Jesus and passion, Jesus and joy, with the notion that all us have a part to play in the great scheme of salvation? And that for all of us who follow Jesus, that role is, in one way or another, to serve others? What if we serve others best by pursuing our passion, by doing, in the name of Jesus, what gives us joy and fulfillment?

We Episcopalians don't like to think about evangelism. We're repelled by the idea or we're afraid of it. So of course we don't do it well, or we don't do it at all. But what if we thought of serving others –something we are more comfortable with – what if we thought of serving others by sharing our passion with them? Our passion for – whatever – and also our passion for Jesus?

Our presenter at the clergy day talked about a colleague of his who was a passionate fisherman. The guy said, "I'd never dream of inviting someone to church until I'd invited her to go fishing."

I know most of you really love St John's. You might find it easier to say you love the community here than to say that you love God, or, even more challenging, to confess that you love Jesus. But it is love that brings you here, and love that keeps you.

How about sharing that love with someone who hasn't felt it yet? What would that require?

If you had faith the size of a mustard seed

And you do, my dear friends, you have that faith, and more. . Alleluia, Amen