

"Increase Our Faith!" 10-02-16

Psalm 37:1-7

Luke 17:5-10

Not a day passes when in some form I don't pray, "Lord, increase my faith". Most often that prayer occurs during times of unanswered prayer, when God appears silent and hidden, and personal requests of the church, others, our society, and my own are not forthcoming. It requires faith to trust that God is not abandoning us.

The disciples felt similarly. Jesus told them that we cannot construct a universe without temptation. Yet, he tells us, woe to that person through whom temptation comes.

Jesus then stresses the importance of forgiveness, a forgiveness extending beyond the measured forgiveness most of us extend. Forgiveness is not a matter of calculated math.

As Jesus drives home these points, the effect is to move the disciples to cry out, "Increase our faith!"

And so Jesus addresses the power of faith. Even faith as small as a mustard seed may move mountains, he tells them. The impossible may become possible.

It is apparent to me on this World Wide Communion Sunday that the state of our nation and world struggles to apprehend the active presence of God and have faith. Are we on our own? In a world of ISIS, a refugee crisis, political manipulation, fear and the hate accompanying it, we ask if God even hears or cares. Why the apparent deafening silence?

Faith is the thrust of the soul into a future always hidden. I grew up in Northcentral Montana in wheat country. My maternal grandfather was a wheat farmer. There was faith each year that the seed planted in the fall ground would produce in the coming spring. Dormant and unseen throughout the winter, was anything happening in that soil? I was always amazed when spring arrived and the green heads would push their way through the ground.

Can anything ever be accomplished without faith? All of life is about faith. We all have faith in something. Politicians challenge us to have faith in a future their economic programs will ensure if we elect them to office. Such was the case during the debate between Trump and Clinton. But might such faith be only whipped up excitement rather than faith?

The theme of our Stewardship ministry this year is "Faith in Our Future". We stand solidly in the middle of an interim period in the life of First Presbyterian. When will we have a new senior pastor? What will our future be like? Our temptation might be to pull back, hold our giving, drop out for a while and wait to see what happens. It is easy to stagnate during an interim. Attendance often wanes. Ministries and the vision and energy to sustain and engage them often get sabotaged with a wait and see attitude. It is all very human.

I understand that, but wonder if Jesus might be nudging us differently. I hear Jesus inspiring faith in God regardless of present circumstances. We are called to move according to the voice of the Holy Spirit within the actualities of the present moment. That posture stands in opposition to the emotions and passions triggered by much of life's tragedies and sufferings. Such events too easily eclipse our ability to trust and have faith in a loving God.

Faith is never a magic formula transporting us beyond present reality. Jesus reminds us that faith finds expression within the quotidian, the everyday activities of life. His illustration may seem a bit harsh and foreign to us, but more importantly is the point he is making. "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 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?'"

Jesus asks a rhetorical question leading in to his point. "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'".

Faith **may occasionally** lead to victory and triumph. However, what I hear Jesus saying to us is that faith is about obedience to what God has given us to do in the moment. The mountain of faith is moved in the mustard seed of loving acts toward those closest to us, our attending to our worship of God and prayer, the openness to God's voice and doing what we are asked, and being attentive to the needs and plight of people in our world, to name a few. It is in the doing of the small things that we often ask ourselves, "Does it really matter?" Jesus says that it does.

Some perspective on this might be found in an interview with a few WW II survivors. They were asked how they spent a particular day. One said he sat in a fox hole all day. Once or twice a German tank drove by and he shot at it. Others said they played cards and frittered the time away. A few were engaged in firefights. This is how the days passed like any other as infantrymen on the front. It was only later that they learned they had just participated in one of the most decisive battles of the war, the Battle of the Bulge. As Phillip Yancey tells the story, "it did not feel decisive to any of them at the time, because none had the big picture of what was happening elsewhere" ("Grace Notes", Yancey, p. 233).

This is where the discipline of trust and faith is important. Day to day as we execute our God given tasks or duties, regardless of our mood, great victories in the larger work of God are unfolding. We show up, do what we are asked, and trust the outcome to God. Hebrews chapter 11 tells of those faithful people of God who "died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them" (verse 13). They trusted in the bigger picture of God's sovereign work in the world. That is what the writer means when he says "And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (verse 6).

Even though faith must embrace a hidden future, at the same time "it is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (verse 1). There is a substance to a faith centered in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, of whom Paul can affirm that "He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together..." (Colossians 1:17). We have faith in a future that God is defining. Why?

Because this is Christ's church and he will build it. We are his servants doing his bidding and "we have only done what was our duty."

Sometimes faith lives within the experience of a Soren Kierkegaard. He spent much of his writing reflecting upon tests of faith often calling into question God's trustworthiness. As he looked at biblical characters such as Job and Abraham who survived difficult challenges of faith, he concluded that the purest forms of faith emerge from such ordeals. In the case of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac or Job and God's wager with Satan over his life in the test of his faith, he concludes that even though I don't understand I will trust God regardless. I will show up and do my duty.

Paul's prayers in the New Testament are worthy to study in that light. Embracing in faith a radical trust in God's sovereign care, response, and provision, his prayers show how he rose above fears ignited by present circumstances. He could be found in the hopelessness of a jail cell praying and singing hymns of praise. In a similar fashion, Christian civil rights protesters in the 60's who were arrested and taken to jail were known to pray aloud and sing hymns.

Christians around the world join in unity, praise and prayer around Christ's Table this morning. Together we affirm God's love, care, and compassion for us. We acknowledge God's inclusion within his love of the marginalized and forgotten in our world. God would wish the inclusion of all around this Table. Never does our faith seek to manipulate God to do our will, but always seeks to align itself with the doing of God's will, responding to the task placed in front of us.

And so we join around this Table with our brothers and sisters in Christ who are gathered this morning in Cuba, Mexico, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, South Africa, Christians living and worshipping in every nation around the globe. Together we all join in requesting Jesus to "Increase Our Faith".