

Upsizing Faith?

Faith is a word we use often as a people. We call ourselves a people of faith. We refer to faith often, and faith is mentioned frequently in our texts. In fact, it is in the opening of our gospel passage today. But as the title indicates, this time the subject seems not to be about the presence or absence of faith, but about the size—and the question is, “Does faith come in sizes?” As I mentioned when introducing the lectionary reading, this chapter from Luke seems somewhat disjointed when first read; and the reading itself seems as if there are two unrelated thoughts placed together. Our reading begins at verse 5 with a plea: “Increase our faith!” For some reason the lectionary reading from Luke’s gospel skips over the first verses what has been designated as chapter 17. Let’s try to unravel this by going back to the beginning where Jesus turns to his disciples and begins instructing them. Chapter 17:1-2 reads: “Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for your if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of the little these little ones to stumble.” These verses are also found in Matthew, but in a different context. Yet when the passage for today begins a few verses, the text refers to them not as disciples, but as apostles. Disciples traditionally are ones gathered around a teacher to learn while apostles are those who have attained a mature level are then sent out to teach. Jesus, as he has neared Jerusalem has been preparing these men for this transition to becoming apostles and making disciples. So the apparent disconnection of these verses to us at first reading is probably misleading. Our reading begins with the plea in the imperative “increase our faith!” If you place that next to the warning given to these men that there were going to be occasions in the future when they would stumble but that if in their stumbling they caused others to stumble the results for themselves would be dire—like a millstone around their neck as they were thrown into the sea—then a plea for a strengthening of faith seems a likely response. Who among us when faced with a difficult situation doesn’t seek to be strengthened? But those aren’t the only verses before we get to the pleas for increased faith. Jesus continues with Luke 17: 3-4-“Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” This is the instruction which leads to that impassioned plea for increased faith. “And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” The same person, seven times a day, and I must forgive? It seems that here the disciples understand that they will need faith to be able to forgive, and that a lack of being able to forgive will then become those occasions for stumbling which will be like millstones around their necks which can lead to drowning in a sea of unbelief. Suddenly this disjointed chapter doesn’t seem so unconnected at all. Jesus’ reply to their request is “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.” Although our consideration of the passage often stops at this image of the smallness of the mustard seed in comparison to the mulberry tree, Jesus continues his instructions to the disciples with another scenario about a master and a slave. This also seems unconnected to the request for faith, but listen carefully to the situation Jesus describes and consider how it might apply to the faith life of disciples. “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'? What Jesus is asking by these questions is: "What is the behavior which is expected of the slave?" The answer is obvious. The master is not going to ask the slave to sit down and eat, but is instead going to request to be served first and then the slave will be allowed their meal later. It is understood that their relationship is based on obedience. That is not the end Jesus' instruction. Jesus then poses the question which is the point which reconnects the situation to the disciples. "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 what only what we ought to have done!'" If we return to that instruction which seems to have caused the disciples to feel that need to have their faith increased, it was Jesus' instructions about forgiveness. The call for us to forgive as we are forgiven is always a difficult process. That is why the image of it becoming a millstone rings so true for us. I think it is also why there is this second turning point in this passage, for often, when we feel that we have done this, there is a tendency to perhaps take some pride in it...to perhaps feel that we have accomplished something for which we deserve some praise...? And then perhaps we need to hear that voice of Christ saying, "Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?" For aren't we commanded to forgive as we are forgiven? And perhaps the disciples instinctively got it right...these are the times when we need our faith to strengthen us...to allow us to forgive when we are wronged...for in those moments it is often that the light that is the light of the love of Christ in the world shines the brightest...it is in those moments that the love that Christ brought into the worlds is most clearly witnessed. As to the size of faith and whether or not it even comes in sizes. Jesus' statement was that "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." A mustard seed is tiny indeed, even embedded in magnifying marble sized glass as a necklace pendent I have from childhood and a mulberry tree is fairly large, so that indicates faith is a powerful thing. I can testify to the truth of that. I can also testify that faith whether or not it increases in size, the more one relies on it, the stronger it seems to be. Fundamentally faith has to be understood as a tool which comforts, strengthens and empowers us to be witnesses and disciples of our Lord. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit given to us for those purposes. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.