

Just Do It!

The title of today's sermon resembles a popular advertising slogan. I don't remember exactly when Nike began using it or if the slogan came after or before the logo check mark. That entered popular culture with their Jordan tennis shoes. I borrowed the title from an older commentary on this passage. Through Luke's narrative we are on that final lap of Jesus' ministry. He has set his face to Jerusalem several chapters ago and we have encountered several parables which he used to teach those who would follow him two related things. He was teaching about God's vision for a community on earth which resembled a fulfilled and realized kingdom of God. Included with this teaching were some expectations about how those who followed him would live as disciples belonging to him and in that newly forming community. At this point his disciples come to Jesus with a request which seems to them to need urgent attention: They say to Jesus: "Increase our faith!" This request is framed by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and then is followed by the narrative about the one Samaritan leper who returns to thank Jesus for his healing. There have also been teachings in this series not being the cause of someone else's stumbling and offering unlimited forgiveness. Confronting the idea of possible being a barrier or a block in the matter of someone else's faith is a sobering thought. The call to offer forgiveness to someone who repeated hurts you, and does it in the same way ...is one that perhaps seemed too high a standard. All of these things together seem to have seemed too much of a challenge so they requested Jesus to provide them with what they lacked. When thinking of it in this context, we probably sympathize with their request...maybe we have even made one like it when we have been battered by some of life's events. Jesus' response to their request presents us with some challenges on this topic of faith. Throughout the gospel accounts when Jesus heals someone he may say "your faith has made you well." Yet often there has been no action on their part indicating or demonstrating their faith...at least not in the way we often use this word. The Greek word "pistis" used here may also be translated as trust or confidence. Those who have come to Jesus have trusted that he could aid them...they have had confidence that he would...they have had faith. When Jesus responds that if they had "faith" the size of a mustard seed...known to be incredible tiny...that amount of faith is sufficient to do amazing things. The uprooting of the mulberry tree to be planted in the sea looks more like something magical than possible...Jesus is not suggesting that they try that. He is telling them that faith doesn't exactly come in sizes...You either believe...trust...have confidence or you don't. Jesus' disciples can live and act on the basis of whatever faith is theirs, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem in their own minds. In this response is Jesus chastising the disciples about their lack of faith? Or is he perhaps encouraging them not to worry about the smallness of their faith telling them just trust! Some examples of faith in Luke's gospel suggest that faith is not defined primarily by cognitive certainty, nor is it the acceptance of proper theological constructs as we often define it. Faith in Luke and in our lives is manifested in many different ways. Faith is persistence in reaching out to Jesus and trusting in Jesus' power and authority to enable us. Faith is responding with love for forgiveness we receive. Faith is also offering forgiveness with love for wrongs and hurts experienced. It is not letting fear get the upper hand when taking risks that challenge the status quo which is foreign to God's vision and ways. Faith is giving praise to God, having confidence in God's desire for justice and being willing to ask Jesus for what we need. Here

Jesus seems to be telling these disciples...and us...that instead of worrying about the size of our faith, we should just get on with daily living it out in obedience to Jesus' commands and teachings. On those occasions when we too feel the need to ask for more faith, what are we seeking? Some might desire that faith brings a certain kind of certainty, but perhaps this has the potential to become a type of superiority. Some may be seeking a mystical experience, a faith that works like a drug and helps us get through life's ordinary challenges. Some think that faith can be an antidote to struggle; that with enough faith we can conquer doubt, illness and even economic hardship. These "seekings" may be what is needed in some cases. In some ways "mustard seed" faith and modest discipleship may be just what we need. By God's grace, discipleship does not require unshakeable confidence or spectacular accomplishments but often requires ordinary and daily practices of fidelity and obedience to God's ways, day by day. If having "faith"—even that mustard seed type—means having one's thoughts, feelings and actions wholly transformed by God's reign in our midst, then we become a "slave" of God: someone wholly devoted to the spread and growth of God's purposes in this world. Since God's life is immeasurable, God's generosity eludes any of our attempts to manipulate it—either as a power we can control or as a means of justifying or rewarding ourselves. We are invited to serve in the banquet of God's kingdom simply because of who we are, or more importantly, because of the One to whom we belong. We don't earn "brownie points" for our living faithfully. Faith like grace is a gift to us. Having faith gives us tasks to perform as we live each day. Faith as it seems described by Jesus seems like the saying the New England Patriots coach has made somewhat famous: Just do your job. Just do your duty, not because of any reward but simply because it needs doing in this broken world. Just do what needs to be done right in front of you, and Jesus says, you are often already doing this because you know it is what God desires of you. Jesus tells his disciples—both then and now—that we've got all that we need to be faithful, and that being faithful, is about recognizing all the God-given opportunities to just show up and do what needs to be done—doing our work, raising our families, caring for those in need, protecting the vulnerable, reaching out to the lonely, befriending the friendless, keeping this world going, contributing to the common good—all that ordinary stuff. When all that stuff that we do every day is taken together and blessed by God, it's actually pretty extraordinary in what can be accomplished. In this way faith is like a muscle. And the more we look for those opportunities God gives to us daily, the more we act on them trusting in God's presence, the stronger our faith and trust grows. Jesus' response to the disciples is to instruct them not to worry about quantity—that fundamentally faith is not something that can be quantified. Faith is the quality of trusting, of relying on its power knowing that it will be sufficient for our needs. God works through our faith to empower us to do God's will. As we exercise our faith, we nurture it and our relationship with God will grow, enabling us to have a clearer vision about God's purpose and direction in our lives. The more we look, the more we can see. Trusting in God's presence to guide and support, we can daily go out into this world and Just do it. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.