

Luke 17:5-6

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”
6 *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.*

FAITH ON THE HIGH WIRE

Imagine this. We are sitting in the bleachers under the big top. We are laughing at the clowns. We are amazed at the bravery of the lion tamers. This is a very good show and the applause is thunderous.

The acrobats fill the air with death defying feats. Each act seems greater than the last. Finally, we come to the grand finale of the greatest show on earth.

The high wire artist will perform without a safety net. But, he does more than just walk across the wire. He does cartwheels. He rides a bike across the wire. It seems like he can do anything. The crowd goes wild.

The ringmaster addresses the crowd, “Ladies and gentlemen, how many of you believe that this daring man can ride safely over the high wire on his bicycle while carrying someone on his shoulders? Do you believe? If you believe, raise your hands.”

All the hands in the crowd go up and they shout as one, “We believe.”

And the ringmaster replies, “Then who wants to be the first to try it. Who wants to volunteer to sit on his shoulders? Raise your hands?”

The crowd quickly grows silent. And all the hands go down.

That's the difference between belief and faith. It's the difference between staying in our seats and volunteering to climb on the shoulders of the high wire artist.

Faith is a matter of trust.

INCREASE OUR FAITH

The disciples had been with Jesus for a long time.

They heard his teachings. They saw his miracles. They witnessed his confrontations with the religious and political officials.

They saw people walk away because following Jesus was such a hard thing to do.

And they too began to wonder if following Jesus would be just too hard. They had left everything to follow him: family, friends and even their job.

But, the demands of discipleship grew even more stringent.

Jesus asked them to love their enemies, to do good to those who persecuted them, and in the passage that precedes our lesson for today Jesus asks them to forgive those who wrong them over and over and over again.

Jesus was indeed a man of power and wisdom and maybe he was even the Messiah.

But, there was a big difference between believing that in theory and actually climbing on his shoulders and making the trek across the high wire ... without a net. After all, misplaced faith can lead to catastrophic results.

So the disciples cried, "Increase our faith!"

We can understand the disciple's plea because it's our plea. We too are plagued by doubt. We too are plagued by fear.

I am reminded of another man who struggled to believe in Jesus. He said, "Lord, I believe. Help me with my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

Belief and uncertainty can exist side beside.

In order to make the transition from belief to faith at some point in our lives we have to take a leap of faith. We have to trust everything to the God of grace as revealed in Jesus.

I believe in Jesus. But, do I have enough faith to follow him when the going gets rough? We do need more faith. Lord, increase our faith!

MISPLACED FAITH

So, what is faith exactly? People define it in different ways.

Some people talk about faith as a personal pep talk. When we are having problems, some people say, "Just have faith. Try harder."

I don't find this definition of "faith" to be very helpful.

Trying real hard has never bolstered my faith. And there's a reason for this. If we believe in "trying harder" we trust not in God but in ourselves.

And I'm not worthy of that trust.

It would be like someone getting up when the ringmaster called for a show of hands at that mythical circus and saying:

"I believe that I can walk across that high wire without a net. And I'm going to give it a try. I have faith."

That kind of faith is misplaced.

Most people don't have the skill and the training to walk across the high wire. And if they try it on their own, they will fall.

In the same way, if we place ultimate faith in what we can do, we too will fall.

We need someone who can carry us when the path is too high and dangerous.

FAITH AND VULNERABILITY

Jesus did find some people who had this kind of faith. And most often those people were about to fall from the high wire of life.

They had lost faith in themselves and so they were quite willing to put their faith in Jesus. They had nothing left to lose.

For example, a woman with a dread disease touched Jesus' garment. She had been ostracized from the community because of her ailment, an issue of blood. But, she believed in Jesus enough to reach out and touch him. It was a risk, but it was a risk that paid off.

Jesus told her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."

A blind beggar who sat by the road to Jericho cried out for help as Jesus passed by. The crowd told him to shut up. But, the beggar would not be quiet.

And Jesus said, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." He took a risk, and it paid off.

Faith does not often begin with self-confidence. Instead, faith often begins during times of doubt and despair.

We are forced by circumstances to trust in God alone. We are forced by circumstances to cry out to Jesus and ask for his healing.

So I would suggest that if you want to increase your faith, don't look to where you are strong. Look to where you are weak and vulnerable. Look to where you are fearful and uncertain.

That's where you find faith. In those dark places you find the light. In those places of weakness you learn that you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by putting your faith in Jesus.

MUSTARD SEED FAITH

The disciples say that they want more faith. But, Jesus seems suspicious of their motives.

Jesus tells the disciples that if they had just a little faith, even a mustard seed's worth of faith that would make a big difference. They would have the power to plant an oak tree on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean.

It sounds like Jesus is once again chiding the disciples for their lack of faith. The disciples want their faith batteries charged, and Jesus just throws up his hands in disgust.

“You guys still don't get it? What's wrong with you? You don't even have a mustard grain of faith. If you did you'd be able to do great things.”

But, this week I discovered that there's a different and equally plausible way to interpret this verse. Instead of “if” the Greek word can essentially be translated “because.”

And that little change makes a big difference in interpretation. The verse now reads, “Because you have faith the size of a mustard seed ...” now you can do great things.

If we translate this way, Jesus is saying in effect,

“You don't need to increase your faith. You just have to exercise the faith that you have.

Even a little bit of faith, a mustard grain of faith is enough to change everything. The impossible becomes possible when you have faith in me.”

In other words, Jesus is telling his disciples (and us) to climb aboard his broad shoulders. We're about to make the trek together across the high wire.

PERSONAL FAITH

Faith requires courage, the courage to climb on the shoulders of Jesus. But, in the final analysis, faith does not depend upon us. Faith depends upon the one in whom we have trusted.

Faith is personal. In faith we believe that God will make a way where there seems to be no way.

Let's think about faith in a human way.

Do you know someone in whom you have complete faith? It may be your husband or wife. It may be a lifelong friend.

But, this is someone that you trust completely. They will stay with you in good times and bad. They want the best for you.

And that gives you comfort. That gives you the confidence to do things that are hard and sometimes even dangerous because you know that this person is with you and for you no matter what.

That's what it means to have faith in a person.

And that faith is very important. If we lose those people in whom we have faith our lives are greatly diminished. We are not the man or woman that we used to be.

But, suppose we had that same kind of faith in God. Suppose we believed that God was with us and for us? Suppose we believed that God would stay with us in good times and bad? Suppose we believed that God loved us and had a plan for our lives?

That would give us great comfort. That would give us confidence.

In the gospel of John Jesus told his disciples, "I have called you friends."
(John 15:15)

Think of that. Jesus, the Son of God called his disciples friends.

Instead of lording it over them Jesus comes alongside them and encourages them. He does this during his ministry, and He does this through the Spirit after His ministry.

Jesus tells us today,

"The message of my life is this: God is your friend. God is with you and for you. Trust in that. Risk your whole life on that promise. You will not be disappointed."

Even a small amount of faith is enough to do what seems impossible. The important thing about faith is not how much we have but in whom we put our faith.

Even a small amount of faith in God can help us do what others think is impossible.

MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE

Mary McLeod Bethune was born in the small town of Mayesville, South Carolina in 1875.

Mary was the youngest of fifteen children born to a family of freed slaves still living on the plantation. When she was nine years old she could not read or write.

Mary finally got to attend the Trinity Presbyterian Mission School at the age of eleven. That began a lifelong journey of faith and education.

She attended Scotia Seminary in North Carolina and later the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

She wanted to become a missionary, but when no openings were available she taught for a while and then traveled to Florida, first to Palatka and then to Daytona Beach.

It was Mary's dream to start a college. She didn't have much money. And at first they even had bake sales to keep the institution going. In time the school became Bethune-Cookman College.

Mary became the first president of that college. She was a friend to students and alumni. And she even became famous on a national level, consulting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt on many matters.

Her story is an unlikely one. How could she do so much with so little?

Mary relied upon faith and prayer for inspiration. She often said,

“Without faith, nothing is possible. With faith, nothing is impossible.”

Her life and her accomplishments were a testament to her faith.

There is an old saying that “the longest journey begins with a single step.”

The same is true when it comes to the journey of faith. We don’t have to be heroic. We don’t have to be the best and brightest.

We just have to take the first step. We have to do something on the basis of our faith in God as revealed in Jesus.

It’s amazing what we can do when we take that first step.

JUST DO IT

I have a routine every morning. I get out of bed. I make coffee. I feed the dog. I prepare breakfast. And then I throw on my exercise clothes and workout on my elliptical machine for an hour.

Do you think I like to do this ... that this comes naturally to me? No.

But, I know that I have a very important muscle in my body called the heart. And if I don’t do this that muscle will atrophy, and I will have problems.

So each day I put one foot in front of the others because I know that my heart muscle needs to be exercised.

To use that famous Nike phrase, “I just do it.”

In the same way, faith is like a muscle. And like any other muscle it too needs to be exercised.

Do you want more faith?

Exercise the faith that you have today. Put one foot in front of the other. Do that small thing you know God in Christ wants you to do and then see where that leads.

Even a little bit of faith is enough to start a fantastic journey.

Look at Sarah and Abraham who saw hope and life restored in their old age.

Look at Mary, the mother of Jesus who learned that nothing was impossible with God.

Look at Peter, he failed Jesus but Jesus picked him back up and restored his ministry.

No matter who you are or where you are in your life, it's never too late to take the first step of faith.

Don't make excuses.
Just do it!

PLANTING A SEED

Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian minister and a wonderful author. And he tells a story about how he got started on his journey of faith.

He was in an Episcopal Church. The priest was moving along the rail from person to person. And as he gave the host he said, "The body Christ ... the bread of heaven."

But, when he got to Buechner added another word. He added Buechner's name. He said, "The body of Christ, Freddy, the bread of heaven."

Buechner wrote,

"There was nothing extraordinary about the priest's knowing my name—I knew he knew it—and there was nothing extraordinary about his using it in the service either.

But, the effect on me was extraordinary. It caught me off guard. It moved me deeply.

For the first time in my life, perhaps, it struck me that when Jesus picked up the bread at his last meal and said, 'This is my body which is broken for you,' he was doing it not just in a ritual way for the humankind in general, but in an unthinkably personal way for every particular man, woman and child who ever existed or someday would exist.

Most unthinkable of all, as far as I was concerned, maybe he was doing it for me.”

Little Freddy has blessed thousands with his writing. That little mustard seed of faith planted long ago produced great fruit.

Today that same mustard seed is planted in our hearts. When you take the bread this morning make it personal. The body of Christ, Frank ... the body of Christ Hal ... the body of Christ Mark ... the bread of heaven.” [AND SO FORTH]

You get the idea.

Plant that seed of faith in your heart today.
And then go exercise that faith muscle the rest of you days.

Just do it.

Amen.