

Increase our faith!
Luke 17:5-10, Pentecost 19, Year C
7 October 2007
The Reverend Barkley Thompson

You might be surprised to know that among preachers there are certain examples that it is generally considered a bad idea to use in sermons. Particularly with regard to the great saints of the Church, there are those saints that preachers are cautious to lift up as models for us. Just as you wouldn't hold up Superman as the model for aspiring weightlifters, you don't want to put in front of people the superheroes of faith, for fear that they will actually have the negative effect of reminding us ordinary mortals how far we fall short.

Until recently, Mother Theresa was one of those saints that good preachers would not touch. She ranked up there with the likes of St. Francis and Gandhi. A sermon about Mother Theresa was an eye-rolling affair. What real person could possibly relate to her? Who could possibly have her faith?

That all changed this past summer, when ten years after her death and against her wishes, Mother Theresa's letters and diaries were published, and we all discovered that behind her gentle hands and serene face was an ordinary human woman racked by doubt and even despair over the very existence of God. In dozens of letters, Mother Theresa trembled at what she experienced as her *lack* of faith. In one she wrote to a friend, "Jesus has a very special love for you. [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, —

Listen and do not hear..." With the publication of her letters, this saint of the church who had seemed all but untouchable suddenly became just another troubled seeker, just another one of us. As we sometimes do, she felt so beneath the tasks given her that she begged God again and again in her letters to *increase her faith*.

That's the situation of the disciples this morning. Today's reading comes after a series of really difficult teachings by Jesus, and under the weight of these teachings, the disciples feel faithless. As Jesus speaks, they have that sensation of shrinking, and they cry out, "Increase our faith!"

It's the disciples' way of saying, "We just can't do it. We can't succeed at these things. Either you're going to have to give us a dose of Gospel steroids, or you're going to have to find someone else to follow you."

I know how they feel. I have to tell you, starting out here in this active parish, tending to such a large flock, I feel as if a heavy dose of Gospel steroids to increase *my* faith would help me out a lot!

I suspect many of you know this feeling. After all, we're here at the beginning of a new chapter in St. John's life. At our cottage meetings many of you have acknowledged that you've been members of the parish but never plugged in. Other have said that you've stepped away from the life and work of the church these past few years and you struggle to find a way to reengage.

In response, you have this new priest who will encourage (and perhaps badger!) you to make a renewed commitment to the life of the

church, to make new efforts to attend *both* Sunday school *and* Holy Eucharist *every Sunday*, giving God one morning out of seven, two hours out of the one hundred sixty-eight that make up the week. And now, as stewardship month begins, we are additionally asked to pledge of our income in recognition that a portion of our material wealth really belongs to God from whom all blessings flow *and* to jump in to the programs and ministries of our parish.

Under the weight of all this, we may also cry, “Hold on! Increase *our* faith!” Like the disciples, we may feel not up to the task. And this makes Jesus’ response to the disciples in the Gospel this morning seem, well, not very pastoral. I actually like Matthew’s version over Luke’s, in which Jesus says, “If you had faith the size of a *mustard seed*, you could move mountains.”

Jesus then tells the disciples an odd parable about good servants who plow the ground, tend the sheep in the field, and serve at their master’s table all without complaint. It is as if Jesus is telling the disciples to quit their whining and get to work.

Now, we know that Jesus loves the disciples, and we know it’s not Jesus’ way to respond to a cry for help with a lack of sympathy, so what might he mean by his response to the disciples today?

I’m reminded of *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the characters all have in mind that that they need things they do not have in order to accomplish the tasks set before them.. The Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Lion are anxious and scared, and they believe that before they can begin truly living they need greater virtue. “Increase my mind, my

heart, my courage!” they cry in turn. Then they head off down the road together to search for these things.

Along the way, though, circumstances require the friends to *think clearly*, to *show empathy*, to *be brave*. In other words, in the very acts of living and making the journey together, they discover to their surprise that all along they have already had the things they seek. And they accomplish amazing things, freeing the land from the power of evil.

This, I believe, is what Jesus, in his wisdom, is telling the disciples this morning: that faith is not something we receive *before* we live for God and do God’s work. Rather, it is through that work that we come to discover the faith that already lives within us, yearning for expression. It is like the characters in *The Wizard of Oz*, who learn as they travel and grow in friendship that they have had within them all along the heart, mind, and courage they seek.

When the disciples cry out to Jesus, they are unable to see that, with Jesus, they have *already* taught, fed, healed, and followed. They have already moved mountains! But because they are focused on all the things they fear they cannot do, they do not realize the faith that is already within them.

The disciples, even with all their anxiety, have faith. And everyone in this room, simply by virtue of being here, has faith. That impulse to seek and know God, however dim, however vague, that brings you to this place *is the mustard seed of which Jesus speaks*. It is the grain that caused the disciples to first to follow. It is the same grain that lives in me and lives in you.

I want to return to Mother Theresa. She, too, like so many of us despaired at what she experienced as her lack of faith. The belief to which she at times clung seemed as small as a mustard seed. And yet, with that faith she moved mountains. Forget mountains—she loved the unlovable, and she moved the stony hearts of men who command armies and nations.

In his parable, Jesus uses images of plowing and herding and serving at table, because these were the all-consuming ways of life that would have resonated with the disciples. “Live your whole lives for God,” Jesus says in essence, “and you will discover that the faith you need is already within you.”

For us, shepherding doesn’t resonate. But Jesus’ wisdom still does. “Go into your law office...or classroom...or ER...or business,” he might say. “There, and in your home, live for God. At St. John’s, roll up your sleeves and teach your children or join in ministries of care for those on the margins of life. Love with a love that knows no bounds. In living for God and in doing his work, *there* you will discover your faith. And though at first it may seem as small as a mustard seed, it will be all the faith you need.”

Brothers and sisters, you are *here*, and that means the mustard seed is already within you. God’s grace is there, ready to be watered and grow. It is never too early and never too late. And you may someday look back on your journey and realize to your surprise that you, too, moved mountains.

Amen.