First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

Enough Faith?

October 2, 2022

Luke 17:5-10

**5**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.

**7**“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’? **8**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’? **9**Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? **10**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!’ ”

Well, here we are again, faced with a passage that seems to be a mash up of two very different ideas. Usually, when I’m confronted with a reading such as this one, I’m able to find the bridge between the different, and sometimes contradictory, concepts being presented. This time, I really struggled to see the connection and, I’ll add, so did the folks at the Tuesday Bible Study. Verses 5-6 seem to have nothing to do with verses 7-10. It’s almost as if the writer of Luke’s Gospel threw those last 3 verses into the mix, simply to cause us preachers some serious heartburn. The commentaries I looked at, were no help at all. And if you look at the other version of this particular passage, which is found in Matthew 17:20, you’ll see that the writer of Matthew’s Gospel doesn’t even mention the issues raised in the last 3 verses of today’s Luke reading.

So, what’s a preacher to do, when confronted with a situation like this? As I mentioned, I usually try and find a way to bridge the gap, but this time I just couldn’t do it. So, I’m going to focus on verses 5 and 6. It’s not that I’m ignoring the other verses, and it’s not that these other verses lack value, it’s simply that I think verses 7-10 deserve a sermon of their own, if I’m ever brave enough to tackle them.

Let me stop here, for a moment, and share with you a bit of my philosophy about preaching. On those rare occasions where I get to go to church, and simply worship, I go expecting the sermon to be the equivalent of a full on steak dinner, complete with salad, baked potato, (I actually prefer tater tots), hot rolls and desert and, perhaps, a lovely adult beverage. I go with expectation of being fed by God’s word, and my hope is that you come here each week, with that same expectation. Most times, that’s exactly what I get and, again, my hope is that I’m able to provide that for you week after week. However, there are times when I’m expecting a wonderful meal and instead, the sermon is the equivalent of being served a cold bowl of oatmeal. And, in my humble opinion, there’s absolutely nothing worse than a cold bowl of oatmeal. I’d happily eat a bowl of cooked spinach first, before attempting to choke down something as unappetizing and unappealing as cold oatmeal. And, let me say, that spinach isn’t my favorite vegetable, by any means. My point, here, is that I don’t like to preach sermons that have little or no substance, and I certainly don’t like to hear shallow, scratch-the-surface sermons, which fail to offer any new perspectives on God’s word. Now, if all of this seems like I’ve gone off on a tangent, hang with me because I will, with God’s help, tie all of this back to the reading.

In order to understand what Jesus is trying to tell his disciples, we need to back up and look at the first 4 verses of chapter 17. In the New Revised Standard translation, chapter 17 is entitled “Some Sayings of Jesus,” which may explain why verses 7-10 seem disconnected from the rest of the passage. In these 4 verses, Jesus is talking about sin, specifically those who cause others to sin, as we see in verse 1, where we read, *“Occasions for sin, are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come!”* In verse 2, Jesus goes on to say, *“It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to sin.”*

I imagine that the disciples, upon hearing this, were probably thinking to themselves,“Oh crap!” “We don’t want to be the ones who cause folks to be separated from God, because of any actions caused by our lack of faith!” “Lord, increase our faith!” In verse 6, Jesus replies, *“…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.”*

This is where some of my colleagues start dishing up cold oatmeal, in my opinion. Many preachers only focus on verse 6; particularly the word “if.” Gallons of ink have been spilled and whole forests of trees have sacrificed, in order to focus on the idea that if only our faith were just strong enough, everything would be OK. And, on the surface, it *does* seem like Jesus is taking the disciples to task and criticizing their lack of faith which, as I said, is the interpretation that so many of my fellow preachers insist is the only correct one.

I’ve heard countless stories of people who beat themselves up because they feel that their faith is not strong enough. I’ve known so many people who have given up on religion altogether, because they hear from their pastors and fellow congregants that they simply didn’t have enough faith. I’ve witnessed the pain, when this verse has been used to put down a fellow believer; if only you had tried harder; if only you had believed more, if only you had more faith, then that bad thing wouldn’t have happened, or you wouldn’t have sinned. Now, just so we’re clear, my definition of sin is that sin is anything, anything at all, which causes us to be separated from God. And, in my humble opinion, anyone, be it a pastor or a fellow believer, who chooses to demean others for a perceived lack of faith has caused someone to be separated from God.

What if, in verse 6, Jesus isn’t actually condemning the disciples for their lack of faith? What if, instead, Jesus is sitting with his disciples, a warm smile on his face, and telling them that, “Oh, yes, you already have enough faith.” “You may think it’s not enough; it may be just the size of this tiny mustard seed, but it’s enough for you to do great things.” How does that interpretation change things for us?

I think this is exactly what Jesus was saying, not only to his disciples, but to us, as well. I also think Jesus is gently challenging us to increase the faith that is already present in each and every one of us.

What happens when we plant a mustard seed, or any seed for that matter? Do we simply put it in the ground and walk away? Or do we tend to it, watering it, making sure the soil is good? Do we want that seed to grow, or not? Enough of you are gardeners to know these questions are rhetorical. And while these questions are rhetorical, when it comes to gardening, do we see them as such, when it comes to our faith?

I grew up in a faith tradition that values conformity and obedience, above all else. I struggled with that belief system, partly because I’m not a big fan of being told how to think, being the stubborn Irish Pisces that I am, but also because belief systems such as this leave no room for questions or independent thought. If the Church says it’s true, then that’s the end of the matter. For me, as someone who considers himself a relatively intelligent and inquisitive person, this type of system is stifling, to say the least. For many, it is much easier to simply believe what they hear from the pulpit, week after week, instead of having to think for themselves. It’s much easier to be told what to believe, instead of doing the hard work of questioning and discovering what we actually do believe. So, questioning those “truths” is, a serious “clutch your pearls” moment for many, not just in the faith tradition that I was raised in, but for many adherents of other branches of Christianity, as well.

I know that faith is like a mustard seed but, I believe it’s also like a muscle. We all know what happens when we don’t exercise or build up our muscles. Those unexercised muscles atrophy and we become less and less able to do those simple everyday tasks. It’s a matter of biology. We might be able to function, on some level, but allowing our muscles to become weak and flabby prevents us from doing way too many things.

We all have the muscle of faith and Jesus, himself, said that even a little faith is enough to do great things. Imagine, though, how many greater things could be accomplished, if we exercise and build up our faith muscles.

One of the reasons I love the Tuesday night Bible Study, is because everyone there is using their God given intellect to exercise their faith muscles. The ability to sit with fellow believers and discuss, debate, and question what God is truly trying to say to us through scripture in a kind respectful setting is, for me, exhilarating. And that’s exactly how we exercise our faith muscles; through the use of that precious gift of intellect.

When I think back to when we first started that Bible Study, I chuckle a bit, because in the beginning folks were a bit hesitant to challenge me. I had the sense that, because I’m the pastor, some folks thought I had all of the answers. Well, I’m here to tell you that just because I stand up here week after week and interpret Holy Scripture for you, no, I do not have all of the answers. By the way, that hesitation lasted for about 2 whole seconds, before folks got over their hesitation and began to join in an open, honest discussion. I’m very grateful for that, because I learn as much, if not more, from those debates and discussion, and the honest sharing of different interpretations, then those folks could ever learn from me.

Here’s the thing, y’all, we have enough faith, right now, to do great things, even if it’s just a small amount. But, using our God given intellect becomes the fertilizer which allows that tiny mustard seed of faith to grow into a magnificent bush, providing shelter and food for many of God’s creatures. Using our God given intellect becomes the weight room which allows us to build up and strengthen our faith muscles, allowing us to do even greater things than we ever thought possible, in order to help bring about God’s kingdom here on earth.

The choice to build on the small amount of faith, which we all have been graced with, is one that each of us gets to make. Do we tend to that seed, watering it, caring for it, nurturing it or not? Do we take the time and effort to exercise our faith muscles, through study, debate, discussion, and the use of the intellect that God has given all of us, or don’t we? Something to think about.

AMEN