

Increase our faith!

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The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 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. "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?' 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 only what we ought to have done!' Luke 17:5-10

"Increase our faith!"

Jesus! Are you listening?

"Increase our faith!"

Most of us here can probably recognize that this appeal, at the beginning of today's gospel, is a prayer. And not only a prayer; it is a common prayer, a unique moment in all the gospels because the closest followers of Jesus, here called 'the apostles,' speak with one voice. *"Increase our faith!"*

But what do these disciples mean by *faith*? And what would more of it look like? The word *faith*, after all, carries a lot of weight in our language and in our lives. We use it in diverse contexts with diverse meanings.

Consider, as a starting point, the array of Latin words commonly translated as *faith*. The word *visio*, for instance, from which we get our English *vision*, connotes the Big Picture of life and *faith*. In our Christian *visio*, God is almighty, the creator of heaven and earth, but also a living and present being. In *faith*, we continually seek a deeper and more lively *visio* of God.

Meanwhile, the Latin *assensus*, from which we get *assent*, is typically used in the context of agreement with particular doctrines: the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth, the resurrection. After my message, we will practice both *visio* and *assensus* when we recite the Creed.

Important as *visio* and *assensus* are to our Christian *faith*, both the context and the implied tone of the apostle's prayer to Jesus suggest more urgency and immediacy. We are by now in Chapter 17 of Luke's gospel. Jesus is increasingly deluged by sick and troubled souls desperate for a miracle. But opposition to Jesus by the religious authorities is becoming more and more strident. Immediately after today's text, Jesus and his cohort leave behind the familiarity of Galilee. By the next chapter, they arrive at Jericho, only a half-day's walk from Jerusalem.

In this context, it's hard to imagine that the apostles are asking for a better systematic theology or that they want to split hairs about doctrines. What they are likely after may be better captured by a final pair of Latin words, *fiducia* and *fidelitas*. These words frequently emphasize reliable and complete personal trust in relationship – the qualities of *faith* most often brought to the fore in Luke's gospel, where so many characters are doing their best to carry on and find their way in the context of troubles and desperation.

Luke rarely if ever uses the word *faith* to describe people with good religion or good theology or even good morality. In Luke's gospel, Jesus uses the word *faith* to describe the friends who rallied around a paralytic and figured out how to get him to Jesus on a stretcher. (Luke 5:20) In Luke's gospel, Jesus uses the word *faith* to describe the Roman centurion who sent a delegation to Jesus asking him to heal a sick servant from a distance: *"Nowhere in Israel have I seen such faith!"* Jesus exclaimed. (Luke 7:9b) In Luke's gospel, Jesus uses the word *faith* to describe the woman of dubious

character who crashes a posh dinner party to anoint his feet. “*He said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’*” (Luke 7:50) These people of faith in Luke’s gospel are often driven by fear, or they are shunned by others, or they have run out of options and have nowhere else to turn. They typically have a raw, desperate need for what, they now know, only God can give them.

I therefore wonder if, in the architecture of Luke’s gospel, the apostles of today’s gospel are speaking on behalf of all these broken souls, and for all of us, when they pray, “*Increase our faith!*”

This context and this wondering may make the answers of Jesus to the apostles’ prayer seem all the more peculiar or disturbing. Uprooting a mulberry tree and planting it in the sea seems more like a circus trick than an act of faith that bears any relationship to pressing human needs.

And then comes a parable that seems laden with shame and so *unlike* so many other teachings of Jesus. In the words of one Bible commentator, “*The parable of the worthless servant is probably no one’s favorite....it casts God in the unappealing role of a slave driver.*” This same commentator asks us, however, to consider that, “*Part of the parable’s effect is achieved by a shift in the point of view ... from the place of the master to that of the slave.*”¹ And what is the slaves’ point of view? “*...we have done only what we ought to have done!*” One could say that Jesus ends his response to the apostles’ prayer by equating the faith that they seek with *fiducua* and *fidelitas*.

I wonder if the author Anne Lamott has this parable in mind, and I wonder if she can help us better take it to heart for ourselves, when she asks:

*“Where do we even start on the daily walk of [faith]? We start where we are. We find God in our human lives, and that includes the suffering. I get thirsty people glasses of water... My friend Tom goes through the neighborhood and picks up litter, knowing there will be just as much tomorrow. We visit those shut-ins whom a higher power seems to have entrusted to our care – various relatives, often aging and possibly annoying, or stricken friends from our church communities, people in jails or mental institutions who might be related to us, who benefit from hearing our own resurrection stories. My personal belief is that God looks through Her Rolodex when She has a certain kind of desperate person in Her care, and assigns that person to some screwed-up soul like you or me, and makes it hard for us to ignore that person’s suffering, so we show up even when it is extremely inconvenient or just awful to be there.”*²

I’m guessing that you know what it’s like when that Rolodex card comes your way ...

And I wonder if the Rolodex card that Jesus was handing to the apostles’ said, “JERUSALEM: KEEP GOING.” (P.S. EVEN IF YOU ARE MORE AND MORE UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHAT IT ALL MEANS.)

“*Increase our faith!*” When I tried to pray the apostles’ prayer as if it was my own, I initially recalled a line from the poet Rumi: “*When the ocean surges, don’t let me just hear it. Let it splash inside my chest.*” I want my increased *faith* to be a magnificent sensory awareness of God! I want the mystical vision! Don’t you? And, in fact, to be sure, elsewhere in Scripture, even in Christ’s teachings, *faith* can and sometimes does encompass the mystical, ecstatic *visio*.

But that isn’t the picture of *faith* that Jesus draws here in the concluding parable today, is it? Here he points the apostles and us to *fiducia* and *fidelitas*. “*We have only done what we ought to have done.*” And even if it only feels like hard work or monotony or an ordeal, maybe *faith* is increased in us by our showing up, and showing up again, being patient, forgiving, calm, to the extent that we are able, and then showing up again, the next day or the next time.

And because of so many characters and scenes in Luke’s gospel, including today’s, we can know that we are not alone when we falter or doubt. We keep going in what we know ought to be done. And we continue to pray with the apostles and all the company of saints, “*Lord, increase our faith!*”

¹ Culpepper, Alan, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Abington Press, 1995

² *Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*, Riverhead Books, 2012, pp. 24-25