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## Lectionary 27, Year C

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17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Gospel Text – Luke 17:5-10

### **Luke 17:5-10**

<sup>5</sup> The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" <sup>6</sup> 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."

<sup>7</sup> "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'? <sup>8</sup> 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'? <sup>9</sup> Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? <sup>10</sup> 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!' "

## SERMON TEXT:

### **"Increase our faith!"**

We certainly felt like we needed more faith, when he showed up at our church door. I was just a kid at the time, but I can still remember what it felt like to be part of our church community during that season. There was conflict and division and then... our pastor was gone! No one seemed to know what to do next.

**"Increase our faith!"** we hear the apostles' ask Jesus.

Does that feel like a familiar request?

That is when Reverend William Kurz was sent to our church to serve as our interim minister and my confirmation teacher. He was an old, retired pastor with thick-rimmed glasses and an even thicker New York accent. His hands were rough and worn from a lifetime of creating, but his smile was warm and inviting, and when he was delighted (which happened often), his eyes would twinkle with approval.

He came to our church to guide us through this time of transition, but what he really did was put us to work. He had an amazing talent for identifying gifts and nudging folks into action. Suddenly whatever gift you had...was just the gift the church needed. If you were a seamstress, the church needed costumes for the outdoor nativity. If you were a woodworker, the church needed Advent logs for evening devotions. If you were cook, there was a meal that had to be made for the soup kitchen. If you were a musician, **"well, praise the Lord"** because there was an anthem for Easter that absolutely requires the accompaniment of a trumpet. If you

would have given Pastor Kurz a 64-count box of crayons, he would have found a way to create a picture that would wear down every crayon in the box to a nub.

Old, young, no one was excused from service. Grab a broom, read a lesson, serve a meal...you're up! When Pastor Kurz overheard adults telling us teenagers **"youth are the future of the church!"** Pastor Kurz reminded the adults **"that we were the church now!"** Then he gave us a job to illustrate the point.

Pastor Kurz was not the kind of man who gushed accolades in your direction when you faithfully served. You got a nod and an eye twinkle, maybe a... **"you did what you were supposed to do! Never expected anything less."** As a teenager, I loved that Pastor Kurz expected me to serve my church. He never acted as though my service to God was exceptional. To him it wasn't an anomaly, something that I had to create through an act of sheer will. It was what happened when you were part of the church, the body of Christ. Of course, God was going to use you! Why would you expect anything else?

Pastor Kurz kept us far too busy during that season to have time left to worry about whether God was **"increasing our faith"**. We understand that we had work to do. Increasing faith, (growing mustard seeds), that was God's to worry about. It was above our pay grade!

Let God be God. You do your part in God's economy. That's enough!

In a moment of worry the apostles' plea with Jesus, **"increase our faith"**. They just heard Jesus warn them about the dangers of sinning against each other and the call to forgive...even the same person seven times a day. No wonder the apostles' ask Jesus for more faith.

We're not so unlike them. How often do we answer the call to serve by convincing ourselves that we don't have what we need to do it? We tell ourselves, **"If we only had a little more faith, then we could really do something: something important; something impressive; something that would make a difference."**

One of my favorite prayers in all of scripture is found in Mark 9:24. This prayer was made by a desperate father longing for the healing of his son. It is so honest. The father says: **"Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."** That is the struggle of following Jesus. There are days when I wonder if I have enough faith to do the work that God is calling me to do. And I suspect... that I am not alone.

But our concern about quantity reveals a very modern understanding of what faith is. We think of faith as a commodity that we acquire through some sort of intellectual exercise. We emphasize believing the "right things" and in doing so make faith a matter of "the head" rather than "the heart".

Once faith becomes something we possess it is very easy to become preoccupied with calculating whether we have enough of it. We look at ourselves and see scarcity. We need more! **"Increase our faith!,"** we plea with Jesus.

I am convinced that one of the devil's most consistent tricks is to convince us that we don't have enough of what God has already given us plenty of. Because the minute we human beings think we don't have enough of something, we get obsessed with acquiring more. We waste all kinds of time and money trying to figure out what to do to get more of it.

When life is difficult, (which it is from time to time) we may even convince ourselves that the circumstances we find ourselves in are the consequence of not having enough. **"If only we had more faith, things would have turned out different, life would have been better!"** Once this happens, life begins to feel like a GPS stuck in an endless loop of recalibration...around and around we go in an endless circle, never feeling like we have enough orientation to get started - when starting, would be the very best thing for us.

But Jesus seems to scoff at our concerns about quantity saying, **"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 isn't a supply problem, Jesus seems to say. You have everything you need to do the work before you. You just need to start doing it!

The faith Jesus is talking about is not quantitative, it is relational. Another word for biblical faith, is trust. Once we begin to see faith as relationship, a glorious question emerges and begs to be asked... **"Trust in who?" "Friends, who do we trust?"** The answer is...God. We trust in the God who creates order out of chaos. Who fills the world with light. Who sets the sea, the earth, and the sky in place providing the right circumstances for a vast

array of life to thrive. We trust in the God who is active in creation, who refuses to remain distant from humanity. The God (who is incarnational by nature) who enters in. The God who was born into the world through Jesus, who walked on earth, died on the cross, descended to the dead, and rose from the grave. The God who promises to go with us.

Marcus Borg in his book The Heart of Christianity, compares this kind of trust to teaching a child to swim. He argues that the hardest part of swimming is learning to lean back and relax...to float, trusting in the buoyancy of the water. Faith is trusting in the buoyancy of God. The opposite of this kind of faith is not doubt, it is anxiety, it is worry.

Faith as trust is not worked out through an intellectual endeavor. It is worked out through praxis, through doing. You don't teach a child to float by lecturing them on the mechanics of swimming. You teach a child to float by getting them into the water. You put your hands underneath their back as they lean in. "Relax" you say a thousand times. Then you wait and wait...and eventually they let go...and the water takes hold of them. Their body ebbs and flows with it. Faith works the same way. You are never going to feel like you have faith, until you use it.

But even then, this action isn't really about our efforts. We are simply being who we were created to be. That is what Jesus is getting at in that rather problematic part of the gospel about how we are **"We are worthless slaves; who have done only what we ought to have done!"** "Worthless" is a poor translation of the Greek word which literally means, "without need". The sentence states: "We are slaves who are owed nothing..." The idea, then, is

that the slaves who do their duty have no favor coming because nothing special is owed to them for having done what is expected." (Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, pg 296)

There is a story from the book, Tuesday's with Morrie that illustrates what I am trying to get at. The book is a memoir by Mitch Albom about his weekly visits with his former sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz, who was dying from ALS. The last story Schwartz shares is this one... **"The story is about a little wave, bobbing along in the ocean having a grand old time. He's enjoying the wind and the fresh air until he notices the other waves in front of him, crashing against the shore. 'My God, this is terrible,' the wave says. 'Look what's going to happen to me!' Then along comes another wave. It sees the first wave, looking grim, and it says to him, 'Why do you look so sad?' The first wave says, 'You don't understand! We're all going to crash! All of us waves are going to be nothing! Isn't it terrible?' The second wave says, 'No, you don't understand. You're not a wave; you're part of the ocean.'"**

To expect accolades for individual service is to misunderstand this whole enterprise we are part of as the church. The flaw isn't simply that we think too much of ourselves...it is to think too little of God. As the church we are the body of Christ. We aren't waves, we are part of the ocean.

So do your part, however simple your part might be, because through it...Jesus enters in...and we become something so much bigger than ourselves.

I don't know what is happening in your church or your life in this season, but I want you to know, you have everything you need to do the faithful work that God has set before you. So don't spend your days worrying whether you have enough.

Use your gifts.

Serve selflessly.

Figure out your first small faithful step and then take it!  
You do your part in God's economy. And let God be God.

That will be enough!

In the name of Jesus Christ, who was, and is, and will be. Amen.

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