

Luke 17:5-10

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!'"

Exceeding Expectations - October 13, 2019

Luke 17:5-10

In Jerusalem, thanks to extensive excavation work, visitors today can stand on the steps of the Temple, the very temple at which Jesus taught and sometimes confronted the Pharisees. Immediately before you is the Mount of Olives. It's not really a mountain, more like a large hill. What makes it interesting is that the hill is covered with small white boxes. The boxes, which are about the size of an end table in your Living Room, are painted white. Inside are the bones of entire families, put there over many centuries. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees on those same Temple steps two thousand years ago, he pointed to the boxes and told them bluntly that they were just like the boxes: white and shiny on the outside, but full of nothing but dead bones on the inside.

Of equal interest is not what can be seen nearby, but far away. On the horizon as you stand on the Temple steps, are two large hills. One looks like a standard hill, triangular in shape. However, the hill on the left looks a bit strange. It starts off as a standard hill, but about three quarters of the way up, it looks like someone took a knife and sliced the top off. Here is a hill that just stops.

The hill is not a hill. It is a fortress — a fortress called the Herodium. The Herodium, as the name implies, was built by King Herod, the same one who tried to have the baby Jesus killed after his birth.

Herod was not a very popular king. He was not well-liked or respected by the people of Jerusalem because he was considered a sellout to the Roman Empire. We're fortunate that none of our leaders today are sellouts to some foreign government.

Anyway, King Herod built the Herodium both as a playground for his rich friends and as a fortress to protect him and his family in case the people around him revolted and tried to kill him. All Herod had to do was ride to his hill fortress and enter through the top. There was no other way in. Then his soldiers would follow and have an easy time defending the fortress since any invaders would have to go up the sides.

But the remarkable thing about the Herodium is not just it's structure, but how it was built. Remember back in the day, there were no dump trucks, cranes or excavators. Just human power. For years, hundreds, even thousands of men worked endlessly to dig out the hill for Herod's fortress and move the soil to the adjacent hill. Quite a feat. Quite a leap of faith. Herod gave the command, and the mountain was cut down. No question, Herod was a cruel and hated man. Yet he also had faith in his ability to get things done — and it did. Faith moved a mountain.

Jesus told a story about a mustard seed and a Mulberry Bush. He said that if we had faith the size of a mustard seed, which is very small, we could tell the bush to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea. In this case, faith would not move a mountain, but it could uproot a plant.

So what is this thing called faith? It saddens me deeply that over the history of the Church, Christians have used and badly misinterpreted these faith stories told by Jesus. Many Christians claim, and perhaps you know some, who think that one's quantity of faith can magically make things happen. Some tell themselves, like Jesus' disciples did, that their lack of faith prevents them from being the men and women they are supposed to be. If only they had enough faith, they would be healed of their diseases. If they only had faith, they would be rich. If they only had faith, everything in life would be all right.

However, I need to tell you that just by showing up this morning, you are demonstrating that you have faith. I daresay your faith is quite a bit larger than a mustard seed. Yet, we continue to get sick, few of us are materially rich, and all of us can point to aspects of our lives which could be much, much better. If faith can move mountains, if faith can uproot trees, if we have faith, then why isn't life going as we wish?

Friends, when Jesus talks about faith, he is not speaking about its quantity, but it's quality. In today's scripture, Jesus tells a story about some slaves and their master and reminds his listeners that people do not get rewarded simply for doing what they are supposed to do. That's easy! That's expected. Whether we are at home or at work, most of us do what is expected of us. We provide and care for our families. We fulfill what is on our job descriptions. All of us have some kind of faith, or at least are looking in to what faith is about, or we would not be here today. In other words, at home, at work, in church we are all doing what is expected.

But here, Jesus is telling us to have a true relationship with God, we have to exceed expectations. We have to do more than the minimum. We have to take this faith thing and bump it up a notch. What can that mean?

Faith is not about a measurable quantity. Believe me, there is no "Faith-o-meter" in heaven that can determine how much or how little faith we have. God is not looking to measure us.

Instead, God is looking at how we put our faith to work in our lives. God is looking at us to see how seriously we take our faith journey. God is not looking at how much money or time we give. Instead God measures our faith in terms of whether or not we trust in God.

Trust. It's a theme we keep coming back to. In every aspect of life, the central question, the only question, is whether we trust in God as personified by Jesus Christ. And yes, truly taking the time to reflect on how much trust we have in God is extremely hard.

The nature of human beings is that we want to go it alone. The story of downfall of humanity, as represented by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, is meant to show that from the very beginning, people did not and still do not want to trust in God, but only in themselves. In short, we are convinced that we can save ourselves. We know what is best. We can go it alone. We don't need faith because we have placed our faith in ourselves.

Look, on a certain level, there is absolutely no problem in placing faith in ourselves. For too many people, their favorite words are, "I can't." Too many of us spend so much time putting ourselves down. Too many people blame themselves for things they simply cannot control. No, we need to believe in ourselves. This church, this Collingswood congregation, needs to have faith in itself. So much doubt! So much fear! How can we succeed as individuals or as a church community if our favorite activity is beating ourselves up by saying, "I can't"?

Yet, faith in ourselves has limits. While it is good to have self confidence, it is good to be able to look at a vacant lot and see a house, it is good to look at empty pews and see them filled, we have to accept our own limitations. We have to accept that exclusively having faith in ourselves and by ourselves is simply not enough.

Today, actually last week, is World Communion Sunday. On that day, we join with hundreds of millions of Christians who have faith in Jesus Christ. They have faith because, frankly, they do not have the option of not having faith.

For most Americans, faith is optional. We can pretend that we can get along without God. After all, we have pension plans, houses, cars, nice wardrobes, and stocked refrigerators. Many can take vacations or visit their families. Most have health insurance to keep their bodies going. So sure, in America, who needs God?

But in the countries with whom we are sharing the Lord's Supper today, faith is not an option, it's a necessity. Most people on this earth know first hand that trusting in God is the only thing that keeps them going day by day.

How do you live when you only have enough food for a meal or two? Faith. How do you live when your nation is about to be invaded? Faith. How do you cope with illness when there are few doctors and medications? Faith. I can hardly say I've been in many countries, but I've lived in southern

Africa for many years and I've visited India for a number of weeks. I must say that in these places, faith is so powerful, you can feel it as soon as you get off the plane.

Many, even most of our fellow Christians have little certainty about the future. For example, I pastored a congregation in Lusaka, Zambia. My members were quite well off, compared to much of society. In fact, much of their lifestyle was identical to our own. Nonetheless, even among these people of wealth, faith was strong. All of them, really all of them, had lived under the dictatorship of a man called Kenneth Kaunda. Kaunda governed almost at whim. Members who were in government or industry could literally learn they were dismissed from their jobs by reading the newspapers. Or, they could be appointed or promoted the same way.

All my members were also responsible not only for their own families, but for their extended families. Members often asked me how much they should help their relatives. With so much uncertainty in their lives, with so many demands on them, they needed faith to make sense out of life.

I've said this once and I'll keep saying it: everything we have, everything we see around us is an illusion. One little phone call, one visit to the doctor, can turn our worlds upside down. Months ago, I went to the hospital billed as a routine procedure. A blood clot in my leg, a ventricular fibrillation, and three operations to drain fluid from my abdomen, and I'm still recovering. Very little of this could be expected and I thank my wife Kelly for her unwavering support and all of you for graciously adapting to my situations. My faith lessons I learned in Africa and India, the very people with whom we celebrate communion today. I also learned in Atlantic City, where I remember the guests at Sr. Jean's Feeding Program in Atlantic City, many of whom were homeless, yet lived lives which in many cases they chose. I think of the HIV positive men at the First Presbyterian Church of Elizabeth, which I served before coming here to Collingswood, who in the 1990's lived under a death sentences and turned to trusting God in Jesus Christ to make peace with themselves. Men who, when the retrovirals were discovered, embraced the church more closely and did amazing things with no resources.

Welcome to World Communion Sunday, where we sit at table with people of faith from all over the world. People whose living conditions may be similar or far different from ours. People who are well acquainted with the sudden changes life can bring us. As we join at the table today, let us, like them, trust in our God who loves us, guides us, and never, ever, lets us go.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.