

Weekly Reflection

Pentecost 17C, 2022 • Luke 17. 1-10

Doing Faith

Debie Thomas

This week's Gospel reading begins with a request you might recognize: "Increase our faith!" If you're anything like me, you've made this request more than once in your life, perhaps in the blunt, insistent language the disciples use in the Gospel of Luke. "I can't function on what I've got. You haven't provided enough. Give me more!"

To be fair, in the verses preceding the lection, Jesus has just delivered some heavy-duty teaching: "Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come." And, "Even if your brother or sister sins against you seven times in a day and seven times comes back to you saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

Hardly easy stuff — no wonder the disciples cry, "More!" Given the context, I'm inclined to applaud them. After all, their request feels so earnest, so well-intentioned. They're not asking for wealth, or physical comfort, or even safety from harm. They're asking for faith. What could possibly be wrong with that?

Something, apparently, because Jesus responds with uncharacteristic annoyance. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed," he scolds them, "you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

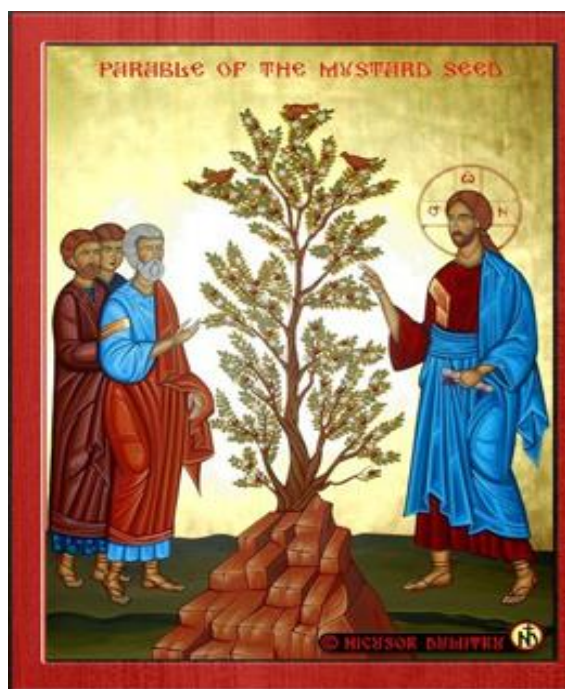
Worse, he launches into a slave-and-master analogy that grates on the modern ear:

"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.'"

I'll confess up front: I don't like Jesus in this passage. He sounds harsh and impatient. He seems to promise the impossible — a mulberry tree that bears fruit in the sea? His usual social radicalism is nowhere evident; he sounds like an endorser of slavery — one who not only accepts the institution, but relies on its obnoxious abuses of power. Finally, he tells his disciples to regard themselves as worthless, and to expect no appreciation or gratitude for their labors.

What is happening in this passage?

I can sidestep the interpretative difficulty in part by acknowledging that the lection is disjointed, not a coherent Jesus story with an arc and a context, but a cobbled-together collection of sayings that probably didn't originate together. I can also minimize my discomfort by recognizing that the passage is rife with hyperbole. Jesus isn't talking



about literal mustard seeds, oceans, mulberry trees, or slaves; he's exaggerating on purpose to make a point.

But the passage still compels me to wrestle with it, because I care about the request at its heart. "Increase our faith!" the disciples ask. "Increase my faith!" I ask in some guise or another nearly every day. And Jesus says? Well, no. He says no. Why?

Maybe the only way to answer the question is to unpack what I mean by "faith." What exactly am I asking for when I beg God to give me more faith? Sometimes, I'm asking for "the faith that moves mountains" — a supernatural ability to impress or manipulate God into doing what I want. Sometimes, I'm asking for an intellectual boost — an increased mental capacity to believe in the more challenging tenets of traditional Christianity — the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the Second Coming. And sometimes, I'm asking for an antidote to anxiety. God, please take away the fear I feel as I face your invisibility and your silence. Grant me certainty so I'll feel happier, holier, stronger, braver. Rewire my brain and my heart so that it becomes impossible to doubt you.

When I take a hard look at my assumptions about faith, Jesus's "no" begins to make some sense. What if faith isn't quantifiable? What if it's not an emotion? Not an idea? Not a capacity? What if faith isn't even a noun?

What if, instead, faith is engagement, orientation, action? What if faith is a daily, hourly movement into the God-saturated, God-centered vocations we were created to fulfill? What if faith is something we do? Not something we have?

Whenever I read the Gospels, I'm struck by how often and how lavishly Jesus commends the faith of those who seek him out. "Your faith has saved you," he tells the woman who anoints his feet, the Samaritan leper who returns to thank him, the hemorrhaging woman who grasps his cloak. "Your faith has made you well," he tells a blind beggar. "Such faith I have not seen in all of Israel!" he exclaims about a Roman centurion.

What is it that Jesus commends in these people? As far as I can tell, the only thing they do is turn to him. Orient themselves in his direction. Trust him. What earns his admiration is their willingness — even in difficult, painful, and potentially risky circumstances — to lean into his goodness, healing, justice, and mercy.

"If you had faith the size of a mustard seed," Jesus says to his disciples. As if to say, "You do. Don't you understand? You have faith already. This is not about proportion. I can't give you a recipe. We're not balancing chemical equations with a neutron here and two protons there. You have faith — because you have me. You've seen me and known me. What else do you lack?"

I believe the invitation in this lection is for us to go forth and live in light of what we see and know. In other words, to do faith. To do the loving, forgiving thing we consider so banal we ignore it. Why? Because the life of faith is as straightforward as a slave serving his master dinner. As ordinary as a hired worker fulfilling the terms of his contract. Faith isn't fireworks; it's not meant to dazzle. Faith is simply recognizing our tiny place in relation to God's enormous, creative love, and then filling that place with our whole lives.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that we waste a great deal of time and energy looking for the "key to the treasure box of More." All we lack, she argues, "is the willingness to imagine that we already have everything we need. The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are."

G.K Chesterton, in turn, suggests that "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." If I'm honest, I must admit that when I ask God to increase my faith, what I'm really asking for is a spiritual life that's

easy, smooth, and uncomplicated. Jesus's response to his disciples, however, suggests that faith requires rigor. It grows stronger when it's exercised, and weakens when it's idle.

In other words, Jesus doesn't sidestep the disciples' request for faith out of callousness; he sidesteps it out of wisdom and deep love. Why? Because he knows the things that make for human flourishing. He recognizes the muscular living our hearts require in order to thrive. Do faith — and faith will increase. Do faith, and the astonishing fruits of that faith will reward you.