

THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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How Much Is Enough?

The Gospel today points to a fundamental question for all of us, that is: "How much is enough?" How appropriate that phrase for this time of year when words such as stewardship, pledge, proportional giving, and tithe are in the air! The Gospel presents a "You have enough" message, exactly when the apostles are saying --- and we have heard ourselves all say, "I don't have enough to do that." Apparently, you do.

Lord, let thy word only be spoken and thy word only be heard. Amen.

Luke has told us in no uncertain terms, at the end of chapter 9, that Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem, that is to say, Jesus knows what awaits him there, and is headed there straightaway, and nothing will deter him.

On the way, Jesus talks endlessly, it feels like, about the life of discipleship. He talks about hospitality, welcoming and helping strangers, seeking lost sheep, visiting prisoners, lost coins, prodigal sons, the rich man, and Lazarus. Then, although we didn't get to hear it read this year in church, Jesus lays it on in the first 4 verses of Chapter 17 by saying if you cause anyone to sin, may you sleep with the fishes with cement overshoes on! And, you must rebuke those who sin, and, forgive those who come to you, and repent of their sin against you even if seven times a day.

Is it any wonder the disciples cry out, Increase our faith? No one wants to end up in the proverbial sleep with the fishes. I would say Jesus has set them up for this reply on their part by talking about both discipleship AND the faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish incredible tasks.

As much as Jesus has taught about the daily life of the disciple who follows Him, for much of the gospel, Jesus has also questioned the faith of the disciples. You have such little faith, he says often. O ye of little faith, is the old translated phrase. Where is your faith? he asks on the stormy sea. Perhaps there has been some conflation of things: a great and mighty work of telling the sea to stop thrashing, and telling the storm to stop storming, along with the unheard of task of forgiving one person who has offended seven times in one day. So it is only natural that they cry out, Give us more. Give us more faith. Increase it, please, so we can succeed at all of this.

It is a familiar cry. Not the increase of faith, but the increase of more! This applies to our ecclesiastical life, as well. Whenever the church is faced with challenges, we say we need more: we need more resources, we need more planning, we need for people, we

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need more, more, more of everything before we can possibly do what Jesus calls us to do.

I wish you would come to me and say, "We need more Prayer!"

But it is the urgency of the daily bread that seems to drown out the trust matters of faith.

It leads to the procrastination of the things we're supposed to be doing anyway, that is, the daily acts of being a disciple of Christ. And now we're no longer talking of the faith for mighty works and miracles, like throwing a mountain into the sea. In this sense, we all know just how the disciples are feeling. We put off leading Bible study until we know more about the Bible. Or we put off praying for someone on the spot, right when they ask, until we feel more comfortable in such personal moments. Or we put off increasing our pledge until we are making just a bit more money. Just tap into those feelings of need more before listening to Jesus' response. In fact, think about it just for a moment... tap in to what has been the most recent or the most troublesome of these kinds of "I need more of"" in your life? And then listen to his reply.

Jesus' response exemplifies what is wonderful about Jesus and his method of training us and developing our discipleship. Hear what he says. By saying, "if you had the faith as small as a mustard seed" so that, you could work incredible, mighty, powerful acts that we usually only attribute to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Jesus says you do not need to increase your faith; you just need the tiniest bit of faith imaginable. A grain of mustard seed's worth of faith can empower you to do incredible miracles, great works, and even as Jesus would say later, greater things than you see me do. And they would do miracles and great works like their master. But right now they are seeing one thing as the recipient of another. Which is to say, unless you have no faith at all, you already have enough just by believing, and obeying.

This then is what Jesus says to the disciples in their cry to him to increase their faith: wrong kind of increase! For what you have been asked to do as my disciple, what you have is sufficient to get started.

When a woman gives birth to a baby, there is an amazing and often dizzying array of caring for this very vulnerable creature. When we hear stories of babies left in dumpsters its not about a lack of faith for that overwhelmed – or perhaps pathologically uncaring, and those are not synonymous – mother, but rather an inability to grasp the very least of understanding to nurture, something that's been built in by God in creation for the woman as child-bearer.

Certainly there is a need for increase for the overwhelmed mother, but it is not of miracle working faith, but of the need to see what it is already present as a matter of

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motherhood, and with the help of just one other person to help her take the step of nurture and caretaking, the next step is already in motion.

Giving birth and the nurture that follows are quite amazing parts of God's will and intention and design, but not miracle. If birth were a miracle, it would first be proclaimed as impossible. Now, moving a mountain by faith alone is easily proclaimed a miracle.

I just love it when Jesus gives an answer like this; and how you can see that Jesus means both and . Increase our Faith was not the point; however, while saying it wasn't the point, he still tells them that YOU with THAT kind of faith can in fact MOVE the mountain!!! And all he was talking about in response was that little ol' thing called forgiveness, you see, which they thought – and most of us are included – was impossible.

Let's say this again.

It is not a miracle to forgive – given some people and some situations, we might proclaim it a miracle when a particular person finally forgives another!

But its not a miracle. Its not a miracle for you to take on the discipline of daily prayer privately; it may challenge your sleep patterns, but its not a miracle as you succeed; it's not a miracle for you to decide that as a daily act of piety you are going to make yourself available – listening and watching for the moment to make itself manifest – to offer to pray out loud for someone. It might be an incredible act of overcoming your personal misgivings and need for perceive personal emotional protection.

And THAT's what we need to pray for more of. But it's not a miracle.

Its' not a miracle for you to seek out the person you need to forgive; its not a miracle for you this next year to give more money to the Lord. So it is time to be in the same place as the disciple were so you can really hear the Lord's word – Try this: when you start praying about it, and asking yourself how much you want to give in pledge, simply calculate an increase starting with 1%. But for the sake of it, don't stop there. So there you are at the table, while you are adding things in, and increasing the monthly amount, and finally hit a number where your exclamation is, "Lord, Jesus, I would need more faith to make THAT happen," then you are ready to hear the Lord's response to the Apostles.

All this is exemplified by Jesus himself and his travels from that end of Chapter 9 until he arrives in Jerusalem, and ultimately is crucified. You will remember that Jesus has set his face – that can be paraphrased with the term "resolutely" – to accomplish this salvation work. Do you see that for Jesus to actually get to Jerusalem is not a miracle? It didn't take that mountain moving faith to accomplish it. Being crucified didn't take mountain moving faith. It was a miracle that the Son of God should be born into this world as a work of the Holy Spirit and the willingness of Mary. What happened BY Jesus' death, and then his resurrection – these are not simply consequences of doing what is right to

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do, although the moment of the crisis of the will was something he did go through in the garden prior to his arrest. But that moment ended in absolute trust in the presence and work and faithfulness of God the Father! And this is exactly what Jesus, who billed himself as our servant, and the servant of the God the Father at the same time, was called and sent to do as that servant of righteousness. You see that Jesus is speaking of himself in this answer to the disciples around him, "I am only doing what I have been called to do as a faithful servant." Oh My God! Lord give us more of being your servant!

When you hear what God is asking you to give for the work of the Kingdom through your parish you might just end up on your knees like Jesus, and you might just make that your request. Because we all need more strength and trust in the Lord to actually be his daily servants.

All of this then, Jesus' work of sacrifice, and our work of doing what is asked of us as disciples, is as it says in our catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, we are to bear witness to God; for us, it is to bear witness to Christ wherever we may be, and in everything we do as his servants, and as servants to and for each other. As we bear witness, we are going to be most effective, says the catechism, as we not only look for the empowerment for greater works, but also as we include the fulfillment of our duties as Christians: to work, and to pray, and to give.

Jesus' answer in the gospel today should never be seen as accepting a demeaning role in society. As Jesus' servanthood, his complete self-sacrifice to God the Father is that which led to Glory for God, so we are to see our duties, our basic servanthood as also that which brings glory to God.

To withhold that servanthood in those duties, is to undermine the Glory that we are called to give to God. It is not to trust the God who came to save us to continue to take care of us and provide for us. The faithful servant is faithful because he trusts his master also to be faithful. God is faithful in even the most uncomfortable and challenging of tasks and duties.

Yes we are entering into a time of considering our financial pledges for the next year. The cry for us is not give us more so we can give more. It is here I am Lord with what I have been given. So trust in the Lord and give. This is the work of any servant who is doing what they are supposed to do, but even more for us, it is consequently what assists the Kingdom of God to be glorious, today.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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