

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

“Increase our faith!”, they cry out to Jesus.

But by starting at verse 5, the lectionary really does not do us any favors. We do not get the context. So, starting from the beginning of this chapter from Luke, he lays out tough demands for the apostles. He admits that problems with their leadership will come in the future. But he also warns them strongly against being the cause of those problems. If another disciple sins, then rebuke him. But, if that person repents, then they must be forgiven....no matter how many times it happens. And the apostles hear this, and wonder and worry how they will ever measure up.

And so, they say to Jesus: **“Increase our faith!”**

They know faith is a gift from God. They can ask for it, and they can prepare themselves to receive it, but it is for God to give to them. So, they look to Jesus, pleading with him to help out. Because they are scared. Fearful.

We understand that well enough. Every human can. It is in the very core of our brokenness. When faced with big time self-doubt, a crisis of major indecision, or a perceived threat, we tend to lose it. Lose what? Our nerve. Our resolve. Our self-composure. Call it whatever.

We tend to rush away. We throw overboard that piece of the divine nature that God blessed us with upon birth, upon being made in his image.

Our tendency is to identify with chaos, with anxiety, with drama. Popular television is full of it. The Jerry Springer show, where the open wounds and pain of humanity are ripped open in the name of public entertainment and advertiser dollars. We claim that we do not understand the wanton slaughter of innocents a world away, and we shake our heads quietly. But, on the television news, we see family members of crime victims screaming, and tearfully insisting that the guilty creep got off too easy. “It is not fair!”, they cry...and we shake our heads again...this time, in agreement.

So, sure. The apostles saw it coming. They knew their human natures as well as we do, just as plain as if they were staring in their rear view mirror. Only **they** had the wherewithal to “duck for cover”, so to speak...and plead with Jesus for help. After all, the man was right there with them.

And plead they do...and the one word that jumps out at me is **“increase”**.

In St. Luke's gospel, the word "faith" has been mentioned only five times so far. (5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:25, 48). And, in each case...according to one scholar...the word 'faith' is not so much a **possession** as a **disposition**. Faith leads to faithful behavior. This request by the disciples, then, is more like saying, "Make us faithful people!"

Our problem...in this incredibly wasteful and disposable society and culture...is to read it the other way. In this world, the word "increase" means...hey, give me more. Give me more fuel oil this winter. More gas for my car now. A more youthful look with more hair on my head. These apostles sound normal to me. In this world, **everything** is about possession...about having more than we need.

But Jesus, as usual, replies in a **completely different** way. He engages in hyperbole. Using a fantastic, entirely unrealistic illustration...in an effort to shock them into another reality.

The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds, and he sets up a contrast with the large *sukamino* or mulberry tree, all to demonstrate the great power of even the smallest bit of faith...with the same kind of exaggerated language that he will use later to describe a camel going through the eye of a needle. Jesus means, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed — which you do not yet have...." The time will come, however...after the Resurrection...when they do have such faith.

Notice that Jesus does not actually grant the request of the disciples. But, in response, merely describes what great faith is.

Faith, even in small quantities, has great power. The person of faith taps into the power of God which makes all things possible. It is not our faith that works these wonders, but the God who stands behind our faith.

Our faith, then, is like the thousand-dollar bill printed on paper worth only a few pennies. Such a bill has value only as it is backed by the full faith and credit of the government. So also our faith has value only because God blesses faith and empowers the faithful.

So, when it is all in the hands of God anyway....what do **we** do? What **can** we do?

First, as faith is the gift of God, we can engage God about it...and everything else. Time spent in prayer is fundamental to faith development.

Association with people of faith builds faith, so our participation in the worship and life of the church is important.

The scriptures inform and correct our faith. Without the guidance of the scriptures, we tend to slip backward and put our faith into our own ability to control, or manage, or handle the issue. That means we have faith in something smaller than God ...it could be money, a charismatic person, the government...someone or something that will ultimately disappoint us. The scriptures keep drawing us to God so that we can, by the grace and power of almighty God, develop and realize the life of faith of which Jesus speaks here.

We grow in faith as we act in faith. Every gift of God is strengthened by the exercise of it, and this is true of faith as well.

Now, with that in mind, Jesus continues with a parable about the humility of a faith community in service. He describes a future church at work. Feeding the hungry. Clothing the naked. Visiting the sick and the imprisoned. Reaching out to the untouchables of our world.

We do not like to think of ourselves as “worthless slaves”. We prefer to see ourselves as “special lambs.” But we cannot ignore that Jesus calls us to pack a lunch pail, put on a hardhat, and spend ourselves by serving others. Why does he continue to do that?

Because working for....and living into the kingdom of God....all by faith...provide its own thanks.

It is, itself, a life lived in thankfulness, rejoicing in the momentary visions and images of blessings showered upon us within the kingdom of God!

When we let go, and allow ourselves to live with God through a life of thankfulness, it should then almost come natural to live in a way of forgiveness with others, to live as a humble servant doing one's duty to others, for others...just by the very nature of being human, made in the eternal image of almighty God.

Finding out just how infinitely we are indebted to our Lord at the same moment that we find out that we are forgiven it all, is the first step of faith. The first step of a life-giving journey in faith, with the God we understand to be the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.