

Habakkuk :1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 37:1-10
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

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Simple Acts of Faith

When I was a little girl, I wore a necklace that held my very first cross and a little glass globe that contained a single, tiny mustard seed. I loved that necklace and wore it even as a young woman. That necklace reminded me of who and whose I was. From the time I was little, I've known I belong to God – that's what the cross told me – that, and how much God loves me. The mustard seed was my part, reminding me that I needed to have faith, even if my faith seemed very little. The cross and the mustard seed told the story of who I was, and who I still am. Like you, I am beloved of a God whose love is so big that the mustard seed of my faith, so tiny and insignificant was more than enough. And so am I.

I was better at remembering that as a child than I am as an adult. While my faith remains deep and abiding, there are surely times, when like the disciples, I beg God to increase my faith. The disciples thought they needed more faith because Jesus had been asking some very hard things of them and they were not feeling up to the task of discipleship. First of all, there were all those hard parables about how they – and we - are supposed to live in the world, spending all night looking for what's been lost, turning our attention from the rich – which might be us - and attending to the poor, not keeping our money to ourselves but using it to change the world for the last and the least. But the proverbial straw that broke the disciples back, the thing that came right before they were reduced to pleading for more faith, was Jesus telling them that it would be better to tie a millstone around their necks and be thrown into the sea than for them to cause anyone, anyone at all, to stumble in their faith.

Yikes! It doesn't take me a minute to come up with a whole handful of things I've done that could be stumbling blocks for somebody looking to me as an example of discipleship. When you think about it, even for the best of us it seems like a pretty impossible request! Does that let us off the hook? No it does not. While the millstone around my neck is surely hyperbole, and I know God does not expect me to be the perfect anything, I also know the feeling of wanting more faith. I'm guessing you might know that feeling too. We think we need more faith when things are too hard or too sad or too scary. We think we need more faith just to get through our days, and more still if we're going to make a difference in the world. When our worlds come crashing down around us, or even when they don't, it seems natural and even a good idea to ask God to increase our faith. And yet, Jesus says, we only need a mustard seed's worth.

What do you think of when you think of the word faith? How would you describe your own faith? Would you use words like big or small or strong or weak or changeable or certain or empty? Or would you use words like thoughtful or rote or invaluable or taken for granted... or

lifegiving? It's worth thinking about and I encourage you to do that in the days ahead. How would you describe your faith, and equally important, what does your faith have to do with your everyday life?

The Oxford dictionary gives us two definitions for faith –

- (1) complete trust or confidence in someone or something; or
- (2) a strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof.

Interestingly, those two definitions are somewhat opposite. *Complete trust or confidence?* That sounds like certainty. *Based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof?* That sounds like faith to me. And as you may know, for me, the opposite of faith is certainty – not doubt.

We do ourselves a great disservice when we think of faith as the opposite of doubt or fear, uncertainty or confusion. Pastors and preachers have long shamed people for not having enough faith, blaming their cancer or poverty or divorce or death on their scarcity of faith. No matter “how much” faith we have, we will still grapple with uncertainty, doubt and even unbelief. That is something of what it is to be human. At least part of the reason I believe the opposite of faith is certainty is because certainties require nothing of us. “God said it, I believe it!” is a kind of certainty that requires no context, no thinking, no wrestling, no subtlety, no curiosity or wisdom whatsoever. It is a kind of certainty that sucks the life out of the scriptures that want to come fully alive for us. Faith on the other hand, invites wrestling and questions and curiosity and context and meaning precisely because our minds are not made up. To have faith, one must cease to be satisfied with the belief that to be true a thing must be proven. To have faith, one must believe that a thing can be true whether or not we can prove that it happened.

In the letter to the Hebrews we read “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”¹ Among many other things, faith means we can be sure that God's kingdom will come among us – that's what we hope for – and that it is here and now too – that's the conviction of things not seen. And it means we have a part in it. It means we tune our hearts to Jesus, not once at an altar call, or at our baptism or confirmation, but day after day after day in all the ordinariness of our everyday lives. I think that's why Jesus told that story about the master and the slaves... yes, I know that master/slave language is heartbreaking for our 21st century hearts, but it would have made perfect sense to Jesus' first century Palestinian listeners. And I think what Jesus was saying to those listeners – and to us – is that having faith is as ordinary as the servant serving dinner. They don't need a prize for just doing their job, they just do their job. I think what Jesus is saying is that faith is pretty simple and straightforward, not fancy and complicated. I think what Jesus is saying is that faith has a lot to do with just showing up and doing the thing that needs to be done.

¹ Hebrews 11:1

Faith takes on new meaning when we see it the way Jesus described it to the disciples. Because if what he said is true, we express our faith each time open our hearts and tend to the people and creatures and planet that need tending around us, trusting that we are taking our part in bringing God's kingdom ever closer. We don't have to be brilliant or rich or important and we don't have to save the world. If the world could have been saved by human brilliance or human success or human riches, it would have happened long ago. Humans have been brilliant and successful and beyond wealthy for centuries and not a one of us would say the world's been saved. We can't save ourselves, we have a savior for that. And still, we have faith, that God working through us makes a difference.

Does it occur to you that when you show up for work, whatever your work may be, when you show up for work and do a good job, you are being faithful? Do you realize that when you listen to someone who needs listening to, you are being faithful? That when you look a stranger in the eye and smile, when you tend your garden, when you put your kids on the school bus, when you volunteer at Helpline House, when you sit next to the person who is sitting alone, when you take flowers to the nursing home, when you stand up for what is right and stand against injustice, when you cook supper or say your prayers... do you know that these and thousands more everyday acts of goodness are acts of faith? I'm pretty sure Jesus would say so.

Think of one helpful thing you did in the last week, just one.

Now turn to someone next to you and tell them what that one thing was.

And now imagine how the world would be different, emptier, sadder, if none of those simple acts of faith had happened. That's how we change the world, you know. Yes, bigger, seemingly more important things do happen, but these simple acts of faith, your simple acts of faith done in faith and in the hope of bringing God's kingdom ever closer are changing the world. Every single one of them is a sign of hope, a sign of God loving and caring for the world. As it turns out, we are the signs, so no matter how small or insignificant we think we are. And no matter how small or insignificant we think our faith may be, my dears it is so much more than enough, and you are so much more than enough. Pay attention in the days ahead and I promise you will see that God can do more with your tiny mustard seed of faith than you could ever ask or imagine. Amen.