

“Let Faith Arise - Part I”
October 2, 2016
Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost
Text: Luke 17:5-10

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

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!'"

Introduction

Today we begin a sermon series called “Let Faith Arise.” The series will cover a stretch of upcoming passages in the Gospel of Luke over the five Sundays of October and will be on the topic of faith. I hope it not only helps us better understand what faith is, but will serve as an encouragement to stir up our faith. So much of what it means to follow Jesus and the teachings we find in Scriptures, and the daily life we lead as disciples who are filled with the Holy Spirit is wrapped up in this word “faith.” Today’s story involves mustard seeds and slaves. They are the framework through which Jesus begins to explain what faith is.

What Kind of Faith

Faith. Faith is good. Faith is something we want, and faith is something we need. At the beginning of the passage I just read from Luke we hear the disciples say to Jesus,

“Increase our faith!” Asking God to increase our faith is a good thing, right?

The disciples have been listening to Jesus teach them and the crowds with several parables that illustrate the kingdom of God, and how to live one’s life in light of it coming near, and naturally, the disciples want more faith. So they say, *“Increase our faith!”*

Jesus replies, "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.

Obedient mulberry trees. Mulberry trees are known for having strong roots. They can anchor a tree in the ground for 600 years. One does not simply uproot a mulberry

tree. So faith can accomplish the impossible. That's the kind of faith we talk about when we say, "Let faith arise."

It's not about how much, but about what kind; not about quantity, but quality. God is revealing the kind of faith we need. But in what, or in whom, will we put our faith?

The Role of a Servant

Were the disciples looking for more power? Yes, of course, and it would be understandable. Their life is not easy. The conditions they endure under the oppressive hand of Rome only deepen their desire for deliverance from the occupying forces. Perhaps with more faith will come more power. We all seek some power to overcome the hardships of life. We look for advantages through connections and manipulations of circumstances.

But then, as a follower of Jesus Christ, what is our role? Have we forgotten our role? There has been a shift in this passage from mustard seeds and mulberry trees to the subjects of service and obedience. Why the change in topic? Is it related to the disciples' request for more faith? Yes. Understanding faith through obedient service is where Jesus goes.

Jesus does not protect us from looking at pictures of powerlessness. "Look at the slave," he seems to say as a way of pointing to something:

"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 (even) thank the slave for doing what was commanded?"

No, of course you do not, because such work is expected from the servants. But, of course Jesus is talking to servants and slaves with this teaching, so he adds,

"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 have done nothing special. I have only done what needed to be done. No glory no fame. Just an act of service, performed by a worthless slave. Worthless by the standards of man; but highly regarded in the kingdom of heaven.

Ah; to surrender all power, and become like a servant. This is our role. We long to one day hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Jesus as Servant/Lord

Jesus becomes acquainted with grief and takes on the role of suffering servant and does not waiver, all the way to the cross. Which is what brings us to this Communion Table.

Think of the preparation of the Table of the Lord. This table does not get set unless Jesus goes to the cross. The resurrected presence of Christ, as experienced here and everywhere in the world on this day, is not possible without first his death. This is the act of an obedient servant. Preston Centoulo said, "Before every awesome act of God, there is first an act of obedience." Coming to terms with that reality is what brings a lasting faith in the One who came to make things right. That's the kind of faith we are

talking about when we say, “Let faith arise.” Faith in Jesus Christ; the servant of all. He did not come to rule in the familiar ways. No, in the realm of reversals the last is first and the bottom is the top. In Jesus we witness that the Servant of all is the Lord of all.

This is the Table of Grace. Think of grace as the ongoing activity of God in our lives. And here at the Table we find an abundant supply of it; particularly justifying grace. This is a living experience; more than a remembrance, more than symbolism, more than a ritual of tradition. This is where we re-live the reality of the one who gives the gift of faith. This is where we re-connect with the Servant who after working the fields and tending the sheep *does* take his place at the Table; who himself becomes the meal; this same meal that is shared around the globe today.

Jesus is the good and faithful servant, even to the cross. This is the role of Jesus and our role as his followers. Jesus shows us what it means to surrender all power. But in that surrender comes the ultimate reality of being connected to Jesus and reconciled with God. This is our deepest need. When that need is met, then we finally understand true power; when the last becomes first, and the least among us becomes the greatest of all. This may seem a very small thing. But through Jesus Christ, God is revealing the source of our faith.

Come to the Table

To empty one’s self completely is what sets this table.

So, come today to the Table of God. Experience the One who surrendered everything, who *released* all power to then *hold* all power over death. It’s a power that is borne out of weakness, but finds its maturity on Easter morning when it cannot be matched. And ours is faith seemingly small in stature, no bigger than the mustard seed, but believes anything is possible with God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is this reality that sets this Table. This is the experiential understanding of the reality of Jesus Christ shared today all over the planet; the meal that transcends language; the access point of God’s grace that moves beyond national boundaries. This is the very act that reminds us all of what kind of faith we possess; a faith that we place in a Servant—the kind of faith needed to change lives, change history, and transform the world. Let your faith arise! And let us prepare our hearts to come to this Table. Amen.