

Text: Luke 17: 1-10
Title: More than Disposition
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Andrew was a colorful-charismatic-Hope-College-student when he suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car crash. The driver, Andrew's friend and also a Hope student, was killed. Andrew's body was shattered and his swollen brain shut down all but minimal functioning. He was in a coma for weeks.

Worried about what to say or pray, I went to the hospital. After a few minutes with Andrew's parents and siblings, I went into his room. I've been in my fair share of intensive care rooms but the whirring machines, beeping meters, wires, and tubes connected to this young strong kid took my breath away. I didn't have any words. Andrew was unresponsive to voice and touch, but his father held his hand, stroked his hair, and spoke to him with tenderness and confidence...

Confidence. Andrew's dad, a dear friend of mine, talked to Andrew about getting better, about going back to college and graduating. And, because he was on the Hope College Board, he told his son that one day he would hand him his diploma. My friend's voice, heart, and spirit were filled with faith. People were praying all over the country. Surely God would answer. Surely Andrew would be healed. My friend was buoyed, hopeful, and brimming with faith – confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see....

Andrew's mom was more measured.
She saw the long journey ahead.
She knew the hurdles.
She was more cautious, or realistic, or....

Or, maybe it's just a matter of disposition.
No matter the situation, by disposition, my friend jumps in with both feet. Body, soul, and mind, he doesn't hold back. He's all in. Maybe it's the same with faith? He believes, jumps all in, and trusts in God. There is for him, therefore, a kind of optimism, a kind of strength, a kind of faith....

My disposition is different.
I keep limping along with my own doubts and shadows. I'm cautious. Uncertainty and unending questions typically land me in the mediocre-muddled-middle. I'm the tepid-tap-water that scripture says will get spit out.
Therefore, the request of the disciples that Jesus "increase" their faith feels familiar. As I drove home, I longed for my friend's faith. I wanted confidence in the will and working of God. I wanted Jesus to increase my faith.

Have you ever longed for something more?
Have you ever whispered, "I believe, help my unbelief"?
Or, "Increase my faith"?
Have you wanted your faith to overcome your disposition?

If so, you're in good company.

Consider...

The disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith in response to Jesus laying out an ethic of forgiveness. He says that if a brother or sister sins against you and repents – forgive them. In fact, even if they sin against you seven times in one day, forgive them seven times in one day. To which the disciples, flustered and flabbergast, reply, “Increase our faith!”

This comes after a series of similar demands in Luke where Jesus instructs his disciples to:

Love your enemies...

Do good to those who hate you...

Pray for those who persecute you...

If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn the other also...

Forgive seventy times seven...

“Whew! Seriously? Lord, you're gonna need to increase our faith....”

The disciples' request is not for the wherewithal to believe in a belief or expect a miracle. The disciples' request is not to be more spiritually minded, nor born of the desire for an expression of God's presence.

The disciples' request is for the strength to follow.

The disciples' request is for the faith to be faithful.

To which Jesus responds:

If you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.

What's lost in translation is the sense or condition of Jesus' statement.

It's not a challenge: “Come on! If you just had faith....”

It's not a contingency: “Look... if ... you had faith....”

It's not a reprimand: “If you only had faith!”

It's not challenge, contingency, or reprimand.

It's an affirmation.

The “if” clause that Jesus uses here expresses a condition of fact. In fact, it could better be translated, “If you have faith (and you do) as small as a mustard....”

Jesus responds by saying, “You already have it. You already have enough. Even if it is only the size of mustard seed, you already have faith enough.”

Now. Given that reading of this familiar phrase it seems misleading to suggest that if you had just a fleck of faith you could win the battle with cancer, or land that new job, or beat back the black dog of depression.

There is little here to suggest that the measure of faith is what makes things happen. It soils the gospel to suggest that events can take a certain turn because we did or didn't have enough faith. Jesus is not goading the disciples to muster up more faith – as if the

dimensions of faith (bigger, deeper, stronger) are what Jesus is concerned about. Rather, this is a word of encouragement to be faithful in forgiveness. The issue here is not an outcome unto itself; it's obedience.

Faith is not a matter of size, strength, or sizzle. But, as small, dappled, or doubt-riddled your faith is – it is still enough. It is enough to toss trees in the ocean, move mountains, and follow the way of forgiveness.

Eugene Peterson – pastor to pastors and writer of many books – was asked what advice he would give to young seminaries going into the pastorate. His response seems fitting as a way to frame faithfulness for all of us. Peterson said:

I'd tell them that pastoring is not a very glamorous job. It's a very taking-out-the-laundry and changing-the-diapers kind of job. And I think I would try to disabuse them of any romantic ideas of what it is. As a pastor, you've got to be willing to take people as they are. And live with them where they are. And not impose your will on them. Because God has different ways of being with people, and you don't always know what they are.

There is something wonderfully pragmatic here. It cuts through my self-absorbed-fickle-faith....

You're not feeling enough certainty about God? Who cares!

You have faith enough to take out the laundry.

You have faith enough to love your neighbor – no matter how annoying.

You have faith enough to forgive.

Faith is not so much a matter of the head or the heart but of the hands.

Which, I think, is why Jesus follows with this picture of the servant working all day in the field, fixing the meal, and serving the table before being able to rest. It's a snapshot of the nature of servanthood. It's what a servant (and the language here is "slave") does.

This is not about the surprise of grace where the workers get a full day's wage no matter how long they were in the field. This is not about inviting everybody to the dinner without regard for costume or class. This is about servants being servants. This is about the faith to be faithful.

Dear friends, the remarkable thing is that even as grace dismantles any notion of personal or religious merit it also builds a foundation for obedience. You are free and equipped to be who you are in Christ. You are free to be faithful. Whatever your disposition. Whatever size your faith. Thanks be to God.

And therefore today, your faith, even faith as small as a teeny-weeny mustard seed, is enough....

Enough to forgive as you've been forgiven.

Enough to love as you've been loved.

Enough to give even as you've been given to.

Enough to do the laundry and change the diapers, even as your laundry has been done and your diaper changed.

Now that may not preach in a way that pumps-up our spirits, builds a bigger church, or inspires a more robust faith, but it does find us in the company of the disciples learning to follow Jesus.

So....

no matter your questions or your muddled-mediocre-middle,
no matter your disposition,
no matter the size of your faith or the issues that you just can't seem to shake,
come to the table with disciples from all over the world.
Come to the table where the servant serves the servants.
Come to the table where forgiveness is served in abundance.
Come to the table and be strengthened to go forward in faith to forgive others.

Amen.