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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*October 2, 2022*

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-9; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10 (CEV, plus v. 1-4)

I've been thinking this week about something Susan Holmes said in the adult education class last Sunday. She was paraphrasing Father Richard Rohr who said that faith does not keep bad things from happening to you, but when you go through bad things, faith is what gets you through them.

Think about all the people in Cuba and Florida and South Carolina who have had property and comfort and even life ripped away from them by Hurricane Ian. Certainly there are a lot of people in those areas with deep faith. Deep faith didn't keep the hurricane away, but faith is what is now helping them begin to heal.

And so it begs the question, should we be praying to have "more faith"? What does having more faith or a stronger faith actually do?

Today we heard in Luke 17 from Jesus' disciples who say to him, increase our faith, or "make our faith stronger," as it says in the Contemporary English Version. I used that version today instead of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible which we normally use because of the more accessible language, and I added verses 1-4 to today's assigned lectionary reading. In those first 4 verses, Jesus tells his disciples that if you cause someone to sin, it would be better for you to be thrown into the ocean with a heavy stone around your neck, and that if someone mistreats you 7 times in one day and says they are sorry, you should forgive them.

It's no wonder that in verse 5 the disciples respond to him by pleading, "make our faith stronger!" It's hard to keep someone else from sinning, and perhaps it's even harder to forgive someone if they mistreat you 7 times, even if they *do* say they are sorry. No wonder the disciples felt like they needed more faith. No wonder they pleaded with Jesus, "make our faith stronger."

And so maybe it's surprising that Jesus answers them by saying that even a teeny tiny bit of faith, the size of a mustard seed, is enough—enough even to uproot a tree and replant it in the ocean. Jesus is assuring them that they already have the faith they need. They don't need to "make their faith stronger" or increase their faith.

But what they *do* need to do, as Jesus illustrates in what he says next, is *practice* their faith. After Jesus tells them they have enough faith, he uses a strange image of a servant not receiving special thanks for what they are supposed to do in the first place. What I think Jesus is saying here is that having faith is not about measuring it—it's not about hoping you have 25% more faith than you did last year—it's about *using* your faith—putting it into practice, especially when things are not easy. That's what servants of God do—we don't get special recognition for having faith. Instead, it's a given that as people of faith we will actually use our faith, particularly when things are hard.

Theologian Francisco Garcia tells the story of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he began receiving death threats during the Montgomery bus boycott in the mid-1950s. Garcia writes, "One night after a particularly troubling phone call, King found himself exasperated, unable to sleep, and ready to quit. While offering a humble, desperate prayer, King says that he felt the presence of God like never before and heard the words speaking to him in the depth of his soul, 'Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth. God will be at your side forever.' As King notes, 'the outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.'" (workingpreacher.com)

It was a humble, desperate prayer that changed King's inner fear and distress so he could handle his outer situation. I doubt that King's prayer that night was the same as the disciples' in this gospel—he didn't pray that God would make his faith stronger—but maybe his prayer was an admission to God that he was really scared. Maybe all he could say in that humble, desperate prayer is "I don't know what to do, but my eyes are on you."

And yet, that teeny, tiny little prayer was enough—enough to open King's heart to God's direction and inspiration. That mustard-seed size of a prayer gave him the courage to stand up for righteousness and truth that ended up changing our country and continues to change us today. Kind of like uprooting a tree and planting it in the ocean.

The thing is, you don't "have faith," faith has you. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. You can't manufacture faith. Faith isn't something you get with a 10-step plan or measure on a scale. Faith isn't something that happens on your own—it's something given to you by God, fostered in Christian community, and expressed in how you live your life. And when you feel you have no faith, or not enough faith, remember the mustard seed. Remember that it's not the amount of faith that matters, but how you practice it. Remember that you already have enough, because

even a small amount of faith can help you weather a disaster;

even a small amount of faith can help you forgive the people who are hard to forgive;

even a small amount of faith can help you do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God;

and because we are in the middle of our Stewardship season, I'll also venture to say that even a small amount of faith can result in generosity, because living out our faith naturally leads to giving generously.

Our faith can get us to the action we hope for when we practice it. Our faith tells us God is always with us, so we get through disasters because we practice our trust that we are not alone. Our faith shows us how to forgive, so we practice forgiving others. Our faith lays out the pathway for justice and peace, and so we practice justice and create peace. And our faith teaches us to tithe—to give 10% back to God of what God has given us—and so we practice doing so, which actually comes back around to show us we can depend on God, no matter our income level.

And remember, practice does not always mean perfect—that's why we open our worship service every week by confessing our sin, returning to God, and remembering the promise of forgiveness given to us in baptism. But it's the practice of our faith, not our plea to have more or stronger faith, that really matters.

As we were encouraged in 2 Timothy today, "rekindle the gift of God that is within you." God has already planted in you the gift of faith. Even if it is only the size of a mustard seed, it is enough. God is enough. And God promises that you, my dear friends in Christ, are enough. Amen.