

Sermon on Luke 17:5-10  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 2, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
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We are used to being asked to rate the quality of a movie, a concert or other form of entertainment on a scale of “One to Ten”. For example, you might rate the best movie you ever saw as a “perfect 10” and the worst as a “zero”. You’re familiar with the concept, right? If you were to “rate” the amount of faith in God that you have, also on a scale of one to ten (with “10” being the faith that Jesus had), what number would you give yourself? A one, a three, a five, or a seven? Possibly even a nine? Probably not, as we are our own worst critics, and we tend to subtract our “doubts” from our “faith” to make it a lesser number – when actually, our doubts serve to *increase our faith* in the long run, though this is a difficult concept to understand! We also tend to put “saints” and other pillars of faith – such as Abraham and Sarah, Moses, the apostles, saints like St. Francis, Joan of Arc and people like Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. up there at least at “nine” – when these people struggled mightily with their faith and would probably give themselves a two or a three! But we tend to idolize them and create myths about the ease by which they acted by faith. We think that we pale in comparison and fall short. Maybe.

Obviously, you can’t put a “number” on faith, measure it, or put it on a scale of one to ten! That was just to get your attention. But too often in our own minds, we tend to think that we don’t have “enough” faith and “sell ourselves short”, especially in comparison with other Christians and people of faith whom we are convinced have “more faith” than we have. But “how much faith” is enough? How much is needed? Jesus said that *“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.”* Again, a bit of hyperbole with his word play using the image of the smallest of seeds (for faith) versus the largest of trees (for the task), but we get the point! It’s not the *amount* of faith that is so important, but the fact that you or I have *any bit of faith at all* which makes all the difference in the world! One drop can make you move mountains (maybe not literally, but do greater things than you or I would ever expect)!

In this world where there are/ multiple challenges to faith, large and small, when so many people seem to be losing their faith in “organized religion”, we get nervous in the church today about whether faith is dying out! Actually, we are not so different from the disciples who followed Jesus around Galilee, when they saw all the miracles he could do with his faith, and how he challenged them to go beyond the expectations of faith that they had. He turned their world upside down

by saying a poor man like Lazarus was going to heaven before a rich man would, and told them how many times we must forgive someone who does wrong to us (*at least seven times a day – an infinite number!*). So the disciples cried out to Jesus at the seemingly hopeless task of having enough faith to do such things, and said, “*Lord, increase our faith!*” That’s when Jesus said all you need is *faith the size of a mustard seed*. The tiniest bit of faith is enough. For it is the “secret ingredient,” which changes your life from hopelessness and despair to hope and trust. So what is *faith*? How would you define it?

Too often today we think of faith as belief in a set of principles, such as the beliefs listed in the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed. But in a world and culture where rational thought is “king” – when we don’t believe something unless you can prove it by being able to see it, touch it, measure it or understand it – faith as “cognitive certainty” is *impossible!* Because you can’t prove anything by faith to satisfy every doubt. (That was Thomas’s original challenge, which we all share!) So faith cannot mean the ability to believe some, most, or all that we are taught in Christian doctrine. If it were, then most of us could not confess the Apostles’ Creed with total integrity – we would have to “cross our fingers” every Sunday! Right? It’s like trying to sing “*the land of the free and the home of the brave*” with our hands over our hearts – we’d all have to “take a knee” because we know it’s not always true! So faith is not “cognitive certainty” – it doesn’t mean “I believe in all of these impossible things without a doubt”! So what is it?

In the letter to the Hebrews, we read that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” (*Heb 11:1*) The true definition of the word “faith” (*pistis* in Greek) is “*trust, confidence, commitment*” in a person or a principle – and for us Christians, in God, in the person of Christ Jesus, our Savior. Martin Luther’s favorite term for faith is *trust*. Which leaves room for doubt – and questions - about some of the things said about or attributed to Jesus, but *trust, hope, and confidence* in the person who gave his life for us, who was raised to life in order to give us new life forever! And commitment to follow him, in order to experience this new life which Jesus has promised to us all.

It starts with trust in God for the small, mundane things in life – and if we can trust God there, it will eventually translate to the bigger things. It’s like when a child learns to trust his or her parents in the little things, they will trust them to bring more important things later in life. We learn to thank God for our food in table prayers, and learn to trust that God will provide for our needs – and then we learn to take all of our needs to God in prayer. But it starts with “*God is great, God is good, and we thank him for our food*” – that is one place where faith starts, like a little mustard see, and begins to grow! In the end, this childlike faith in a God who provides food and drink to us as children grows to the time when we trust in the God who welcomes us to eternal life when we come to our time of dying. It

is also expressed in the trust we have in God to “move mountains” in state or federal legislation, to change laws, save lives, and even to reform and transform the Church according to principles of faith (such as compassion, mercy, justice and equity for all people).

To Jesus, faith is a so simple – it’s an expectation, and not extraordinary that his disciples have it! This is what he means when he said in the second paragraph of the lesson that it was like having a servant who did their work (which was expected of them – you don’t have to thank them expressly for doing their duty!). It’s an analogy to what living by faith is like. Jesus expects you and me to trust him, to trust God, and act accordingly. It should be *so simple* – like breathing, like eating and drinking – but we know that the simplest thing can be *so hard!* Like having faith and trust in God to provide, when from the beginning of time we human beings have *rebelled against God, and sought to go our own way!* There are so many other distractions in life, and idols to worship, that the simplest thing of trusting God and following Jesus in our lives can be the hardest thing of all! Because we’d rather do it ourselves! And then, when things fall apart, we blame God or lament our misfortune and ask for help. It’s our human nature!

But Jesus offers a better way, a simpler way to live, with trust and faith in the one God who gives us life. It’s a matter of obedience to God, and duty for the Christian, now that we have been baptized – similar to when one serves in the armed forces, and you obey orders and do your duty – without expecting gratitude and thanks in return. It simply is our duty...and our joy, as we say in the preface to the Eucharistic prayer in our liturgy! To live with faith as an expression of our thanks to God for the gift of life, forgiveness of sins, and life everlasting!

So perhaps rather than simply seeking to define what faith is, we should share examples of what faith looks like. In Luke’s gospel, faith is persistence in reaching out to Jesus, trusting in Jesus’ authority and power, as the Roman centurion did when he called upon Jesus to heal his sick servant, expecting Jesus to have the power and authority to heal just like he had authority as a Roman officer. Faith is when we respond with love for the forgiveness we have received from Christ, as the woman in Luke’s gospel did when she washed Jesus’s feet with her tears. Faith is not letting our fear get the upper hand, when Jesus calls us to deny ourselves, carry the cross and follow him – when we’d rather hide out and remain invisible. Faith means being willing to take risks challenging the status quo, as when Jesus faced the betrayal and suffering that was going to come, and put in front of his disciples a little child and told them to welcome her as they would welcome Christ himself. So we are challenged to address poverty, suffering, hunger and abuse experienced by children in this world, not only in Aleppo, Syria, but also in our own communities in St. Paul and Minneapolis, and on Indian reservations in Minnesota, North and South Dakota. Faith is giving praise to God

when we are healed, as the leper did in the lesson we will hear next Sunday, and having confidence in God's desire for justice like the persistent widow who insisted that a dishonest judge grant her justice. Faith is asking Jesus in prayer for what we need, like the blind man who sat by the side of the road and asked Jesus to have mercy on him and give him sight.

Today for you and me, faith is when we come to God to ask for forgiveness and mercy for our sins in worship, when we pray for one another and for the world out of our needs for healing and for justice. Faith is when we reach out with love and open our doors to small and struggling congregations to worship in this church facility, and to support groups for those challenged by addictions to alcohol or drugs. Faith is when we welcome our brother Obang, who came to us from Sudan, help him bring his family to also come and live with him here, and assist them in their search for a safe place to live in this community. Faith is when we continue to worship God faithfully every Sunday because this is our duty and our joy – not a reason for boasting, but because *this is what we Christians do!* Faith is when we do actual work to help give our brothers and sisters a place to sleep with Project Home, fight for Earned Sick and Safe Time for workers in St. Paul, and work for sensible legislation that will prevent gun violence and domestic abuse. Faith is found in all those little things that you all do to keep this church going, vibrant and alive, feeding people and cleaning floors, teaching children and welcoming others. All these things that you and other people do to care for others, make their lives easier and make the world a better place, are examples of living with faith and trust in God. They don't make us heroes or saints, but they do show what power a small seed of faith in our lives have to transform us and the world! All these things together make us the Church, followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So thanks be to God for the gift of faith, no matter how small it seems in you or me – because even the tiniest seeds of faith can change everything! Amen.