

*A sermon preached by Father Dwight D. Duncan, ssc – Rector, St Matthias' Church, Dallas, Texas*

## INCREASE OUR FAITH!

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PENTECOST 18

Luke 17:5-10, C #22

Almost thirty years ago, when I was still a callow young priest in the Diocese of Virginia, a friend of mine and I found ourselves in the same situation: we had become priests-in-charge of the “big parishes” in which we had been Senior Curates and which were engaged in rector-searches. It was a set-up for some extraordinarily frightening situations for us two young men, bearing such responsibility so early in our priestly careers.

But none I encountered could match the one with which one day my friend was confronted. You see, soon after his Rector's Warden and wife separated, he learned that the warden, to put it delicately, was "involved" with a number of women in the parish. When my friend met with the man to confront him, the warden didn't lie. He matter-of-factly explained that he had "needs" like everyone else which he found difficult to control and surely God would understand and excuse him.

I'm not going to tell you how things played out! That's my little “tease” of you this day. But “how things turned out” does not serve my purposes in this sermon. It is the situation and the Warden's remarks which do. For as absurd as the Warden's remarks are (I hope all of you see that they are!), I have found them over the years to be but a gross example of the way most humans operate. We play games with ourselves, with others, with God...with reality.

Hey! Often enough in the ordinary events of my days, I know what I ought to do in some matter and I even have the wherewithal to do it (I mean I have the emotional/spiritual strength to do it), but I won't want to do it. So I don't. Then I whitewash, or come up with some excuse for the choice I made: I just wasn't strong enough to do otherwise, or my situation was so unique that the rules that normally apply just didn't fit. Are you any different from me? I have yet to find any of you who are. No, this mode of operation is common to all us children of Adam and Eve.

Let's follow the logic of that Rector's Warden to its end. Who is the one who did not prevent coming to him those itches which he scratched? God. So who's at fault for the problem? God. Conclusion: God might say it's a *no-no*, but he's got to excuse me. Perfect cop-out from all responsibility towards our life and the lives of others. But how far do you think we're going to get with this type of reasoning? Well, let's see.

This situation may be what Jesus is addressing in today's gospel, when he addresses his apostles' request, "Increase our faith!" This request was their response to a commandment Jesus had just issued them, which is not included in today's gospel reading but comes immediately before its beginning point: "...if [your brother] sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, 'I repent', you must forgive him." (*Lk 17:4*)

That's a hard saying, isn't it? You feel it in your bones, as do I. So did the apostles, who cried

out, "Increase our faith!" Depending upon the inflection with which that exclamation was made, it could mean, "Say what? That's a bit much to ask. If that's what you expect of us, then give us the strength to do it. If it proves too hard for us, you're the one at fault for expecting it of us."

Sounds like us! How often when something is expected of us which would stretch our muscles to achieve, do we react with a "Get real. That's too much to ask." Then, to excuse our refusal to do it or our failure in doing it, we blame the one who made the expectation. You young people react this way to your parents or teachers; we adults react this way to one another.

Already you see, the apostles have prepared their cop-out: If they don't obey the Lord's command, if they fail in their attempts, the reason is the weakness of their faith. And of course, the one at fault for this is him from whom they asked an increase of faith and who obviously has not given it.

Slick reasoning. How far does it get them? In a head-on collision with the One they wish to bear the blame. Jesus' reply to them is blunt: "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea, and it would obey you.'"

In other words, "The problem, busters, is not with your faith. The problem is that you don't want to act upon it. You don't want to be exercised in the living of it. You want someone to do life for you, to make you what you can be without your cooperation and effort." And one implication of Jesus' succeeding remarks about the servants simply doing their duty is that God is NOT going to do our life for us. Our life will be made through co-operative effort between him and us, or it won't be made at all.

Pay attention to the image Jesus uses about faith: a seed, and a very small one at that, a mustard seed. Jesus is telling us that faith is a seed his Father has planted in us.

What is this seed we call faith? It is our capacity to risk trusting in God's competence as God **such that we obey him**. This is faith: I'm confronted with some difficult or unpleasant situation, one perhaps hard to make sense of. But I say to myself: "Well, God is God, I'm his, and he is competent for his job. All the circumstances of my life are ones which he has either sent to me or has not prevented to me, because he knows how great I can be ultimately made by and through them. How I feel about them is a matter indifferent." That's faith talking. And then, because of these convictions, faith enables me to obey God in the circumstances of my life. Each of us has this seed of faith in us. You would not be here if you did not have it.

And faith is not a quantifiable thing, which can be increased or decreased. But it does grow. It grows in the same way the mustard seed grows: the mustard seed must be cracked open, so that it can send down deep roots into the earth and rise above earth's surface to become its final self, a very nice bush.

Now, how is the mustard seed cracked open? By the circumstances of its life: it must be pushed into the ground, where water, seeping into it, swells it so that the pressure of the earth upon it then cracks it open.

Faith is cracked open in you and me by the circumstances of our lives, particularly those whose demands stretch us and those which are unpleasant for us. They press upon us, challenging our trust in God, tempting us to disobey him or to abandon our relationship with him.

Every time some circumstance tempts us to disobey God or abandon him, and we do not, our seed of faith cracks open wider, its roots sink deeper into God and we become stronger in our living like Jesus and taste more fully the joy of being in harmony with his Father.

Every time some circumstance tempts us to disobey God or abandon him and we submit, but then repent and return to God, our seed of faith cracks open wider, its roots sink deeper into God and we become stronger in our living like Jesus and taste more fully the joy of being in harmony with his Father. Remember that with God, it is not our failures which are so important, but whether after we fail, we come to him for help in starting in again.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus God has provided us living proof of the wisdom of trust in him. He IS in charge; he brings life out of death. So, dear ones, rejoice in the gift of faith God has given you. And with grateful heart, embrace the circumstances of your life, working with his help to obey him in them, for they are the means by which your faith is cracked open and transforms you into that heavenly creature which in truth you are and which one day you shall fully and finally be.