

## Faith Gymnastics?

### SLIDE - GYMNASTICS

“Increase our faith!” – the cry of the apostles is not surprising to us as we have been following the narrative in Luke’s gospel. Yes, they are the called and chosen ones in whom God rejoices. They have been captured by the great love of God and are learning of God’s abundance and mercy for all! I think they began to see that God’s dream was a dream for the entire universe. But they questioned whether they had the strength and ability to do what would please God.

The apostles began to gel as the body of Christ on earth. In this midst of the forming of the community God declared his mission. I borrow from Dan Erlander’s interpretation of God speaking of his followers in Ephesians 1: “I have even more to teach them. I must help them to see that they are called to abundant life even beyond living in friendship with me and with one another. They are called to live in a new reality where everything in all creation is reconciled – where plants and animals, earth and water and sky, planets and stars live together as one universal household united in love.” Ephesians 1:8-10.

In the gospel of Luke we hear Jesus instruction to the apostles concerning the use of possessions in service of God, the mandate to forgive those who wrong you over and over again, the call to take up his cross, heed the warning of causing the vulnerable to stumble, and much more. We understand their cry, “Increase our faith!” We, too, can be shocked by the teachings of Jesus and wonder about our own ability to accomplish things which are part of the kingdom goals. We may struggle with relationships and not have confidence in our self.

Jesus doesn’t seem to take the apostles seriously. He seems to throw the issue back at them, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Go jump in the lake’ and it would obey you.” If you only had the tiniest grain of faith, you would be able to do things beyond imagination. The apostles don’t believe Jesus and neither do we. How can the tiniest amount of faith yield great results? We do not believe it is possible.

Instead, we want more faith. We want OUR faith to be larger. If our faith would be increased, then we can do great things. We need to build up our faith, and the building of our faith becomes our goal, so that we can see that we have what we need to do great things.

It reminds me of the tale of Charlie Atlas. (John Aurelio) Charlie was a skinny youth. In the mirror in his bedroom he could only view the upper half of his body, but that was enough. His arms were twigs and his torso had no definition. It was true what his peers said, he was a weakling. He decided to get a few weights and work on his biceps, triceps, pecks and abs. Days turned into weeks and then months. Little by little his muscles began to show. Bulges defined his biceps and pectorals. He began to admire the growth of his muscles. People would begin to notice him. He kept on with the weights because he desired still more muscles. Then one day he collapsed. As it turns out, he had only increased what he could see in the mirror, the upper half of his body. He was out of balance and one day he found out his legs no longer supported the bulk of his torso.

### SLIDE - FAITH

We want more faith. We want OUR faith to be larger. It becomes our own improvement project where the building of our faith becomes our goal. We want our spiritual fitness to show. We want to see and admire OUR faith. We want to see that it is something. Will others notice our faith, our spiritual

prowess? We say we don't care, but we do. Is God noticing how great our faith is? We began to crave that God would notice us, too.

The more we think about improving our faith, the less we are focusing on the One who is the object of our faith. The more we focus on how faith-filled we are, how our actions look, the more we hope God will notice what we are up to and perhaps, serve us in our self-improvement project. We increase, and Christ's influence decreases. There is no room for Christ in our lives. Suddenly we find ourselves far away from the Lord of Life.

Faith becomes a work - our work, and if we really believe, God will do what we want him to do. Our Faith. God's Power. God will make our life easy, remove our worries, ensure that we have what we want, wealth, health, and position in society, all because of our faith and God's service to us. Then one day our scheme comes to an end. Our faith falters. Our world constructed out of our imaginations and our work collapses. Without Christ as our source, we are nothing.

This whole exchange about faith takes place as Jesus is en route to Jerusalem. Along the way Jesus keeps on exhibiting the "authority on earth to forgive sins" and his way to be "among us as one who serves." Reaching Jerusalem, he will go to the cross, take the burden of our sin, and die the death we were to die.

#### SLIDE - SPIRIT

From the cross we will hear statements of astonishing faith that are so different from our misplaced efforts. "Father, not my will but yours be done." (God's Work. Our hands.) "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." From the cross the truth will be seen. Jesus is righteous. Jesus is innocent, in right relationship with the legal system, having committed no crime, and with God, being obedient to God's will. Jesus is filled with faith.

Hear, then, again Jesus' response to the cry of the disciples "Increase our faith!" Hidden in the text is the unique construction of the sentence that the apostles sensed but was unknown to English readers. The hidden construction is the condition of certainty. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, and you do!, you can uproot trees and throw them in the lake." The Spirit of God has already given us the mustard seed of faith that we need to be joined to Christ. It is invisible in essence.

Martin Luther saw that in baptism we receive this incredible faith. "Baptism is so full of comfort and grace that heaven and earth cannot comprehend it. It promises and brings the entire Christ!"

#### SLIDE - TRUST

Abundant life in Christ is trusting in God's mercy, forgiveness and promises; living as a saint and sinner, that is, totally forgiven and totally in need of forgiveness; responding to God's love by loving God, the neighbor and all creation, that is faith active in love, or as we say it today, God's Work. Our Hands.

The faith you already have is enough, and more. The faith that is surely given and present in baptism is sufficient. Because this is so, we can celebrate, we can spend our time living out the Gospel, and not worry about growing our faith. How freeing!

What the apostles had heard as an extraordinary case of discipleship, "If the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive," Jesus means us to see as rather quite ordinary. In our ordinary exchanges with one another, doing what is

expected of us over and over, a mundane act of faith, carries extraordinary potential for transforming the world into the image of the Creator. Jesus will address evil, abuse and violence elsewhere, but in this text the emphasis is on ordinary life.

To be a disciple is to simply do what is expected as one follows God and the Word and Christ. Psalm 1 – Happy are those whose delight is in the word of the Lord, and on this word they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season.

Psalm 37: Trust in the lord, and he will act.

Faith is a gift. God's grace is sufficient, even the tiniest bit of faith, like the splash of water at the font, like the sip of wine and taste of bread at the Lord's table, is enough for our needs, is enough for our obedience, and more.

Is it no wonder that Luke often shows rejoicing, at healing of the crippled woman, as the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Lost Son are safely gathered in, and in the presence of the Lord.