

Proper 22 – C

The Apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" And the Lord said, "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."

There was a man who decided he would walk over Niagara Falls on a tightrope. Others had done it, but this guy had a twist. He was going to push a man in a wheelbarrow all the way across the falls. He began to prepare for the event even before he found someone to ride in the wheelbarrow. He set up a tightrope near the falls and every day he could be seen pushing and balancing the wheel barrow filled with stones.

One day a young man came up to him to wish him well. "Good luck," he said. "I've been watching you practice and I have confidence in you. I know you can do it." The tightrope walker answered, "Do you believe I can do this?" And the young man replied, "Yes, of course!" Again he said, "But do you REALLY believe I can do this?" "Yes, of course," the young man said a second time. The tightrope walker responded, "Then you're my man. Get in the wheelbarrow!"

That's what God asks us to do, get in the wheelbarrow. And that's a whole lot scary, isn't it? I don't know about you, but there's no way I would ride in a wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls on a tightrope – not if the greatest tightrope walker in the world was pushing the wheelbarrow, no way! I have no need to cross the falls in a wheel barrow or otherwise. But I do need faith. We all need faith. We don't need faith in a tightrope walker. We need to be able to trust God in the most difficult situations imaginable, and that's not easy. No wonder the apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith. In some ways, faith is like being pushed across Niagara Falls in a wheelbarrow.

But God is not a tightrope walker. God is the creator of heaven and earth who controls all things. We do not have to worry about his foot slipping, or a sudden gust of wind causing him to lose his balance. God can be counted on in any and all situations. More importantly, God loves us, completely, unconditionally. And God has proven his love for us. He has proven it most supremely in sending his only Son to die for our sins that we might be reconciled to him and be part of his kingdom and live the abundant life that he desires we live.

And he proves his love in countless other ways, most of which are seemingly very ordinary. Many times we are too preoccupied to notice how he works in our lives. Author and educator Henri Nouwen relates this incident for us:

"I vividly remember the day on which a man who had been a student in one of my courses came back to the school and entered my room with the disarming remark: "I have no problems this time, no questions to ask you. I do not need counsel or advice, but I simply want to celebrate some time with you." We sat on the ground facing each other and talked a little about what life had been for us in the last year, about our work, our common friends, and about the restlessness of our hearts. Then slowly as the minutes passed by we became silent. Not an embarrassing silence but a silence that could bring us closer together than the many small and big events of the last year. We could hear a

few cars and the noise of someone who was emptying a trash can somewhere. But that did not hurt. The silence which grew between us was warm, gentle, and vibrant.

“Once in a while we looked at each other with the beginning of a smile pushing away the last remnants of fear and suspicion. It seemed that while the silence grew deeper around us we became more and more aware of a Presence embracing both of us. Then he said, “It is good to be here” and I said, “Yes, it is good to be together again,” and after that we were silent again for a long period. And as a deep peace filled the empty space between us he said hesitantly, “When I look at you it is as if I am in the Presence of Christ.” I did not feel startled, surprised or in need of protesting, but I could only say, “It is the Christ in you, who recognizes the Christ in me.” “Yes,” he said, “He indeed is in our midst.” And then he spoke the words which entered into my soul as the most healing words I had heard in many years. “From now on, wherever you go, or wherever I go, all the ground between us will be holy ground.”

Nouwen concludes with these words, “Through our obedience and our discipleship, God’s sheer gift of Grace will become real to us and, from then on, wherever we go, we will be on the holy ground of oneness with our fellow human beings and oneness with our God.”

In feeling the presence of our loving God, we know that we can put our complete trust in him because we know how much he loves us and how constantly he has worked for our salvation. But what about the apostles? What has caused them to make this desperate plea for more faith? First of all we could all use more faith. Since we are all fallible human beings, none of us has perfect faith, so we could all use more faith, stronger faith. But what has caused the apostles to ask for more faith at this particular moment?

This week’s gospel reading follows shortly after last week’s gospel which was the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. But there is this short little paragraph in-between them. And in this paragraph, Jesus talks about two things that cause the apostles to realize their need for more faith. The first is temptations, and the second is forgiving. In fact Jesus tells them that if someone sins against them seven times in a single day and repents each time, we are to forgive them.

Now that takes a lot of faith. Whoever this person is that sins against them seven times in one day ought to be reading the first half of that paragraph where Jesus is talking about dealing with temptations. But the numbers are not important. What is important is that we have the heart to forgive someone. And that does take a lot of faith. For some people the struggle with faith is simply whether God exists or not. And even for those who are convinced he does exist, doubts creep in every now and then. But for many of us, the real struggle of faith is to do the things Jesus has asked of us. To have the faith to believe that what he tells us to do is exactly what we ought to do, exactly what we need to do. We need the faith to be good disciples.

And perhaps nowhere are we more challenged in this than the area of forgiveness. No wonder the apostles cried out for more faith. When Jesus said they should forgive the same person seven times in one day, if he repents, they

must have thought to themselves, “This is more than I am capable of. I need some divine help on this one.” We all need divine help, especially when it comes to forgiveness.

A man went to his priest a week after his mother’s funeral, in the clutches of overwhelming guilt and remorse. He confessed that he had never really had a good relationship with his mother and, as a result, had not given her the kind of care in her dying days that she deserved. But, of course, she was dead, and there was nothing now that he could do. The priest shared with him the Good News of forgiveness: that there was something bigger in the world than he was; that the something bigger was the reality of grace and mercy. He invited him to accept the gift of forgiveness – not because he deserved it, but because it was God’s nature to give it. Then the priest said, “I know of an elderly woman in our congregation who has no children and is very concerned about how she is going to negotiate her last days.” The priest continued, “Not in order to earn God’s forgiveness, but as a sign of the fact that you have received this gift, I think it would be wonderful if you would start doing for this woman what you cannot do now for your own mother.” The suggestion made sense to him, and he began to do it. It was a way of cementing the forgiveness he had experienced. It was a way of looking forward to the future differently, not in spite of the past, but actually because of the past.

When we forgive someone, we usually want them to have earned our forgiveness. We can all be thankful that God does not use that standard. Repentance is what he requires. Repentance is what we need, but we also need the faith to forgive others as God forgives us.

Jesus seems to be saying some incredible things in this passage. The disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith. But you can’t just hand someone faith as if it is a physical commodity. When the disciples asked to be taught how to pray, he taught them the Lord’s Prayer. But when they asked for more faith, he challenged them by suggesting that a little bit of faith could do a seemingly impossible task. Faith the size of a tiny mustard seed could uproot a huge tree and drop it in the ocean. And if you’ve never heard of a sycamine tree, you are not alone. When I typed it in the computer, spell checker suggested sycamore, which is what most of us would probably guess. But actually it turns out to be a type of fig bearing mulberry tree.

In any case, faith is very much like a seed. You plant it and water it, and something much larger begins to grow. Surely the apostles’ faith has been growing ever since they first encountered Jesus. Their faith would continue to grow even after the resurrection. Faith is a life long process. Like the apostles, our faith needs to grow. By using the example of the tiny little mustard seed, Jesus is telling us that through faith God can makes things grow that are much bigger than our minds would have thought possible.

The apostles’ faith grew as they followed Christ. It is the same for us. Our faith grows as we follow Christ. But it is not a chicken and egg relationship. It is not a matter of one coming before the other. Rather, each increases the other. The more we follow Christ, the more faith we have. The more faith we have, the more we follow Christ. Faith and discipleship work together.

That makes it sound so easy doesn't it? Things just keep getting better and better. And it really can be that way. But for most of us the road is not quite that smooth. Most of us manage to fall into a pot hole now and then. And when we come to the realization that we need to get out of that pot hole, we find it a little more than we can handle. And like the apostles we cry out to the Lord, "Increase my faith Lord. I'm struggling here, and I really need some help, some extra help." And Jesus picks us up and gives us a hug and says, "Just follow me, and your faith will grow, and as your faith grows you will find it easier to follow me." Faith requires honesty. For God to lead us into a deeper faith, we must be completely open and truthful in our relationship with him.

And I think that this relationship between discipleship and faith is why Jesus makes this other seemingly incredible statement about the unworthy servant just doing his job. We should remember that Jesus is reminding us what our attitude should be, not God's. He is not negating the reality of a heavenly reward. He simply does not want us to become arrogant and think we are so great because we are his disciples. He wants us to continue to grow as his disciples and grow in our faith at the same time. Our focus needs to be on him rather than on ourselves.

H. K. Oehmig identifies four keys to faith. The first is prayer. "Ask God daily to renew your gift of faith. ... Faith is the movement of the soul that is open to and caught by grace. Faith isn't forced; it's received, given freely by the Spirit." The second key is: "Abandon yourself to an established community of faith." The Book of Acts tells us the first Christian community "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." We should follow their fourfold method. The third key is "Sacrifice in order to love the people you are with... The heart of faith is giving love – and giving it not only to the marginal and the forgotten, but also to the people closest to us." And his fourth key is "Give back to God, not what you think you can afford to give, but what you deeply feel God is calling you to give. There is perhaps no greater barometer of faith – of the desire to rekindle faith- than one's capacity to give, freely, happily."

When I consider these four keys to faith, it shows me that a strong faith must exist here at St. Clement's. This is not surprising. These four things, prayer, community, sacrificial love, and stewardship are things we are strong in. Now, some of us are stronger in one area, and others in another area, but I believe these four keys are a good description of us as a whole. Of course we all need to grow in many ways. We all need more faith.

And we state our faith in the liturgy. After the sermon we will say the Nicene Creed. Three paragraphs each beginning with "We believe" – the great summary of what we believe about God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the middle of the prayer of consecration, we state: "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." This is the assurance our faith gives us for what Christ has done for us and will do for us.

A man was plowing for the first time in his life. He got on the seat and pulled the lever that dropped the plow into the ground, and started across the center of the field. After he had gone a few feet, he turned around to look at the

furrow and was entranced by the rushing flow of topsoil along the plowshare – rich and black. Then he turned back to look where he was going. When he had turned the first time, he had unconsciously carried the wheel of the tractor with his movement and gotten away from the straight line. He pulled the tractor back into line and looked back at the furrow once more. Behind him, wavering across the field the undulating line of his furrow revealed, as though etched in the earth, the wandering vision that he had had.

He soon learned that there was only one way to plow a straight furrow. When you are about to accelerate the tractor and pull the lever that sinks the plow into the ground, you must sight across the field at a distant point and keep the nose of the tractor squarely on the sighting point. You must not turn around to see how the furrow is coming; if you do, give only a hasty glance to see that all is well. Make certain that the fixed point is straight ahead, and bring the eye back to it.

I must confess that I have never plowed a field, but that makes sense to me. And it's the same way with our faith. We must keep the eye of our hearts and minds squarely fixed on Jesus. And if we ever turn away, we must quickly turn back to the only one who can keep our furrows straight, the only one who can increase our faith. And now let us affirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed ...