

All faiths or none

Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve: Pour upon us the abundance of your mercy, forgiving us those things of which our conscience is afraid, and giving us those good things for which we are not worthy to ask, except through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The Collect for Proper 22, The Book of Common Prayer, page 234

THE 20TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (LECTIONARY: PROPER 22C)

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, Psalm 37:1-10, 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10

October 2, 2016

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: LUKE 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "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.

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

One of the things St. Mark's is known for is the simple sign outside our doors inviting "people of all faiths or none."

A lot of people find the statement moving, perhaps people who find themselves – or see themselves as outside the church, assuming that to be in the church requires (demands) both a certain kind and a certain amount of faith – something definable and

quantifiable – and something they feel or, perhaps, have been told they don't have.

In conversations with people about the sign – and in my own reflections – all faiths (all kinds of faith) and no faith – is the experience of any of us and all of us on one day or another – or even from moment to moment. Mostly, no one simply arrives at being a person of faith or "having" a certain

amount or certain type of faith.

One of the legacies of the age of enlightenment in the church is equating “faith” with ideas or concepts. If you can accept certain expressions about church matters then you are or “have” faith and if you can’t think or accept those thoughts, then you don’t have faith....

Thankfully we are moving beyond those straitjackets in “religious” thinking a little bit in our current post-enlightenment and post-institutional age... but from time-to-time I still find myself in those never-ending conversations in which someone feels they need to theorize about God or arm-wrestle people who label themselves or others in a certain way... “born again,” “atheist,” “agnostic...”

Truthfully, it seems to me that faith is a gift that is in every person. It is an element of who we are, created in the image and likeness of God. It is a dimension of being human. We don’t need to make it happen and we can’t lose it.

Faith lives in the context of our actual, human lives in the real world. This is to say faith is buffeted as we are – pushed by all the circumstances that challenge us, undermine us and eventually kill us – as well as the experiences that express birth, growth and life again (after all of the deaths we die along the way).

It’s worth remembering that this conversation of Jesus and his friends and followers is taking place on the way to Jerusalem where he will be betrayed, beaten, and crucified....

Faith and fear are often in us at the same moment.

And thus the followers of Jesus ask for an increase of faith – turn up the volume so we can only hear one thing... not everything.

Everything about living day by day hooks our desperation, doubts and desires.... and if faith can’t vanquish those, what is it good for?

And maybe we just thought it would all be just a bit (or a lot) easier than it is.... We want solutions, perhaps we don’t feel we can make the effort to get to a certain resolution – and, often, we want certainty that we are thinking or doing or being “right.”

Our lives have so much of stress and anxiety, facing into illness, injury, work and financial complexity, the uncertainties of child-bearing and rearing... who will my child meet, what will she encounter, what will build him up or tear him down today?

And then there’s the larger world with all of its burgeoning dysfunction and the questions that come sheeting off it’s hard surfaces like rain in a downpour... whether threatened or actual disasters, the dead-ends of politics, poverty,

violence – the tragedies of trauma, tragedies and terrorism.

No wonder those journeying with Jesus wanted to know whether or not they would have enough faith to act in faith.

And thought that probably they didn't.

Jesus knew it wasn't about words or concepts or categories.

And Jesus knew they had what they needed.

As we do.

Even with the fear that does, at times, stop us in our tracks.

And so we are reminded again and again that faith is a verb, not a noun.... We encounter it on the move, in living, in taking action – and often in relationship with others. “Increase OUR faith....”

It seems to me we need to lower our expectations for certainty, for consistency, for clarity and capability.

Faith is likely messy and has a hit-or-miss quality to it... it unfolds in unanticipated, surprising ways – and often in concert with others... all of whom have some part of the action that may be unclear until later – in later reflection.

Whether what we deem to be our personal lives, our lives among family and friends, or our public lives in community and in the wider world, we have what we need... we don't need an “increase” to be people of faith, to act in faith.

But then, strangely, when we look back, we will likely be shocked at how much faith we had, how much we experienced, how much faith went into being ourselves, into our action, into what came to be as a result of our living in the world, in connection with God and others.

And we may be able to see that, somehow, our faith was with us all along; that, somehow, our faith *increased* in all the ways we needed.



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