

"HOW MUCH FAITH IS ENOUGH?"

A Sermon By

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New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

The angle from which we view things makes a big difference. I believe it was Lord Chesterfield who once pointed out that a horse looks pretty much like a horse when viewed from ground level, but when you climb up into the loft and look down on a horse from the top, it looks a good deal like a violin. Your perspective is the difference.

And remember that scene in the movie "Dead Poets Society", where the young teacher has his students standing on the desk tops in their class room, trying to help them see that our perspective in life has much to do with where we stand. Think about it.

DEVELOPMENT

It's not unusual in the Gospels for the same story to be told by two different authors from two different perspectives. The result is often a much richer interpretation.

For instance, in Matthew's Gospel, we read about the time that the disciples failed in an attempt to heal an epileptic youth. When they asked Jesus why they had failed, He responded by saying it was their lack of faith. And then He added,

"If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you".

(Matthew 17: 20-21)

Wow! That story makes us hungry. I want that kind of faith. We all do!

Now, compare that story in Matthew's Gospel to the one in Luke. The disciples make a request of Jesus. "Lord, increase our faith!" We can sympathize with their request. Who among us has not cried out with that man of old, "I believe...help Thou my unbelief". But notice the response of Jesus to the disciples request.

"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".

Notice how similar the words are to those in Matthew, but there is a slight difference. This time, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus launches into a discourse on the importance of being an obedient servant.

In other words, He seems to be saying to His disciples that their problem is not the lack of faith. Just a tiny bit of faith will work wonders. The problem is their lack of action! If they were doing what they ought to be doing, they would see the results they are seeking.

Do you see the difference in emphasis? In Luke's account, Jesus is saying to us that it is deadly to sit around twiddling our thumbs asking that God give us more faith so that we will do the things that need to be done. What we need is to start doing what we know we ought to be doing and then watch our faith grow as a result of our faithfulness.

FAITH: A GIFT FROM GOD

Faith is a gift from God. I think that this is an important theological truth that many Christians do not understand. We tend to think that our faith is something we have earned by our superior spiritual endeavors. But we're wrong. Such a faith breeds pride and even arrogance. Or, you may think that if faith is not something you arrived at on your own, then it must be the proper reward for your parents' attentiveness to your spiritual needs. But wrong again. God has no grandchildren. We are grateful for Christian parents and teachers who nurtured us, but if our faith is merely blind acceptance of what we have been taught, we could just as easily have been atheists or pagans if our parents had been. One thinks of Romans 12, verse 3 that reads,

"For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him".

Did you catch that? "The faith which God has assigned him".

I like to think that our faith is a gift from God. And doesn't that mean that we already possess all the faith we need? And, if at a later time, we need more faith, He will give us more.

Remember that St. Paul was the most committed follower of Christ who has ever lived. Still he didn't have enough faith to have his "thorn in the flesh" removed. God did give him the grace to endure that thorn. Still, both faith and grace are gifts from God. The problem is not our lack of faith. God has given us all the faith we need.

FAITH EXPANDS TO FIT OUR NEEDS

This brings me to a second insight that needs to be said. It is the nature of faith to expand to fit our needs. Because faith is a gift - not something we earn - God will never put us in a position where we do not have enough faith to be triumphant. Whatever we lack, He will supply. Remember that. That has always been true for the people of God.

The year was 1660. John Bunyan was thrown into jail for preaching an unpopular Gospel. For 12 years he lingered there...entirely cut off from the rest of the world except for his family and a few friends who occasionally stopped by. Yet, if Bunyan were here to testify this morning, he would say that this for him was a time of deepening faith. Why? Because, God gave him faith equal to his needs. It was during a second imprisonment that Bunyan wrote one of the most influential books ever written, that great spiritual classic, Pilgrim's Progress.

One wonders...could Bunyan have written this spiritual classic without his prison experience? Who knows. But we do know that it is a clear spiritual principle that God increases our faith according to our needs. People who live only surface lives...facing no great challenges, following no great purpose, carrying no great burdens....never become deeply rooted in the grace of God. They need no faith...no great faith, that is...and thus they never know a great faith. It is the nature of faith to expand to fit our needs. And there is always enough. We draw upon inexhaustible resources when we draw from God's well.

John D. Rockefeller was one of the richest people who has ever lived. There probably wasn't anything he couldn't have provided for his children. And yet he had a daughter who became obsessed with the fear that she might die penniless? Her years were haunted with the fear that she would die destitute. Can you imagine such a thing...a Rockefeller worried sick about not having enough money?

Can you imagine a child of God worried sick that he or she will go to God's well for spiritual resources in a time of need and finding the well to be dry? God resources are inexhaustible. Did you know that there are even churches that never venture out to do some great work for God because they fear that God may let them down. Unbelievable! Our faith is a gift from God. He gives us faith according to our needs. Yes, the greater the need, the greater the faith. Faith expands to fit our needs. That's the second point.

PUT FAITH INTO ACTION

The central problem in our lives is not our lack of faith, but that we do not put the faith we have into action.

We seem to swing between two extremes. Some Christians experience the "paralysis of analysis". We tend to remain immobile until God gives us a sign that He's real and in control. Our credo seems to be, "Don't just do something, sit there." It's amazing how many truly passive Christians there are in this world. Why two-thirds don't even bother to roll out of bed on an average Sunday morning. Most are decent law-abiding folks. But no one could accuse them of being spiritual work-alcoholics.

I'm reminded of the story of the young woman in her mid twenties from a privileged home. She took a course in First Aid. A few days after graduation she was walking down the street and witnessed a terrible accident. Some of the people were thrown clear and ended up lying in pain on the sidewalk. Later on she was describing the scene to a friend in this fashion,

"It was terrible...it happened so fast right there in front of me....the screeching of the tires and the sound of grinding metal. Then I heard the sound of people crying and screaming in great pain...."

"Yes..yes" said her friend. "What happened...what did you do?" She said,

"At first I hardly knew what to do...then I remembered what they taught me in the First Aid Class. So I put my head between my knees...and I didn't faint."

Then there are a few blessed saints on the opposite extreme. They have a great deal of anxiety if they are not doing something constructive every moment of the day. Some people stay busy...even if it is with activities of little importance. Some of us are like that. Always on the "go-go". We are ready to jump into action at a moment's notice - not because our faith compels us but because we are uncomfortable being still.

I came across an intriguing story recently about a protest movement by students from Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, California. Like many movements that emanate from California, this was a crusade with a difference. The protesting students carried blank signs and blank leaflets.

Bryan Finch, who organized the protest, said that leaflets have become so common that no one reads the signs or leaflets anyway. His group was protesting the meaninglessness of most protests. His was a protest against protests.

Two extremes - passivity and mindless activity. Neither is the way of the Cross. The supreme need of our lives is to involve ourselves in meaningful service to God and humanity. We desperately need to be driven to a great cause. It's true, you can't steer a parked car. Have you ever tried?

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY About a year ago the Christian Century magazine carried a fascinating story about a couple who found a meaningful way of expressing their faith. It's a story you may be familiar with. Millard Fuller was a successful lawyer. But he was dissatisfied. He had it all, and he decided he had virtually nothing. One day he decided to do something about it.

He and his wife, Linda, walked out of their law practice. They sold all of their possessions - giving the money to the poor - and joined Clarence Jordan at Koinonia Farms, a Christian community outside of Americus, Georgia. Together with other Christians of that little community, they searched for a focus for their lives that would have significant meaning.

Eventually, they established an organization that has come to be called HABITAT FOR HUMANITY. You may have read about them. Former President Carter has worked with them, pounding nails and sawing wood. The wonderful idea is simply, in Millard Fuller's words, that "all God's people ought to have simple, decent, affordable housing". So they work along with others, find some poor, decent folks who are willing to work to better their situations, and they work along with them to build a simple, decent house in which to live. And when they're done, these folks have a house at a cost that is affordable.

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY is having a remarkable impact all over this country. It's miraculous how homes...hundreds of homes...are being built for families who need and deserve such housing because this couple put their faith into action...on wheels. The result has been nothing short of miraculous. It's comparable to saying to a tree, "Be cast into the sea", and a moment later there is nothing but a hole in the ground.

DO YOU SEE? Do you see? The problem is not our lack of faith. The problem is our lack of action. We need to give feet to our convictions and then we will end up seeing miracles galore.

When we have come to understand this principle then the word of Albert Schweitzer takes on new meaning for us. Speaking to a graduating class in an English Boys' School back in 1935, Schweitzer said:

"I do not know what your destiny will be. Some of you will perhaps occupy remarkable positions. Perhaps some of you will become famous by your pens, or as artists. But I know one thing: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve".

Those words are true...worth writing down. The unhappiness in our lives does not come from our lack of faith, but from our lack of service.

Do you see a new dimension to the teaching of Jesus about having faith - the faith - of a grain of mustard seed? It doesn't take a lot of faith to perform miracles. Even the tiniest bit of faith will do. What really matters is that you and I take that bit of faith we have and put it to work - somewhere, somehow. And later, if we still need more faith, God will supply it. And when we commit our lives in service to God and humanity, we see our faith grow from a tiny mustard seed to an enormous tree and we witness miracles that we never thought possible. You're not a realist if you don't believe in miracles, someone once said.

"Increase our faith" the disciples begged Jesus.
"Increase your service" Jesus replied, "and you will find faith you never knew you had."

PRAYER Grant us the gift of an adventurous faith, O God. We feel your spirit tugging at our hearts. Make us sensitive to your nearness and your presence. Confirm within us now the intentions and feelings and decisions of this hour spent in Your house. Grant that our faith may have feet and a voice and wings that enable it to fly into our world. In His name we pray. Amen.

VISITORS: Sunday, October 15, 1989

Weather: Sunny and mild...a good day! Low seventies.

Attendance: 140 adults and 23 children. Total: 163

1988: 154	1982: 194	1976: 154
1987: 198	1981: 215	1975: 190
1986: 167	1980: 205	1974: 171
1985: 177	1979: 200	1973: 180
1984: 160	1978: 180	1972: 178
1983: 218	1977: 173	1971: 134

1. IT Miss Kelly Hill: 314 East 78th Street, Apt. 13
New York, New York 10021
Telephone: 535 -4932

Pink card. Letter. New to city. Home Church listed as the USNA Chapel, Annapolis, Md. 23 ish. Came with roommate, Mary Kathryn Holden...visitor os last Sunday, the 8th. She and Mary sat down near front on lectern side.

2. IT Miss Alice Wiechern: 215 West 92nd Street, Apt. 6G
New York, New York 10025
Telephone: nothing listed yet.

Pink card. Letter. Came with Glenn Rye...back for his third visit. She's a United Methodist from Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Coffee hour. Expressed an interest in the Adult Fellowship programs.

3. IT Miss Mimi Hayasaka: St. Mary's Residence
225 East 72nd Street
New York, New York 10021

Pink card. Letter. Has been attending with Reiko Ito the past three weeks. Japanese...limited English. Pretty. About 22 ish.

4. IT Mr. John Yasma: 1 Bogardus Place
New York, New York
942 -2854

Pink card. Letter. John has been to the Adult Bible Class - not Church - the past two Sunday mornings. Messenger. Pleasant and is participating in the Bible Class study.

(over)

5. OT Mr. and Mrs. Hal Brunt: 191 Belle Meade
Memphis, Tennessee

Out of town visitors greeted at door by PC. Spoke of being in Christ United Methodist Church in Memphis...where Maxie Dunnam attends. No other information.

6. OT Mr. and Mrs. Russel Wiener: 80 East Parkway, North
Memphis, Tennessee 38104

Out of town note. Greeted at door by PC. Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis. No other information.

7. OT Miss Sheri Hardin: Box 1261
Mount Holyoke College
South Hadley, Massachusetts 01075

Out of town letter. Can't place her. Indicated in Guest Book that she had a tie with a UMC Church in Oklahoma City. College Student.

BACK AGAIN LIST

1. Daphney Thompson
2. Kim Connor
3. Cory Abernathy
4. Darcy Henderson
5. Chester Narramore
6. Phil Vasan - Tina's friend from India.
7. Julia Predmore: membership interest. To see PC, Tuesday, Oct. 24, 5:30 pm
8. Jay Zimmerman: membership interest.
9. Andrea Stewart
10. Joan - Andrea's daughter.
11. Laytin - Oriental young lady...been here several times.

NOTES

1. Good to see Eric de Freitas. Fran Ellison also with us. New sound system introduced. Bob Lewis spoke of stewardship in service.
2. 18 in Adult Bible Class. 23 on October 8th.