

Building Faith

TEXT:
Luke 15:5-6
2 Timothy 1:3-7, 11-14

October 7, 2007

Where does faith begin? Where do we first learn about faith, about how to be faithful? Who was it that modeled faithfulness for us? How is our faith nurtured in our lives?

This morning, we join Christians from every part of the globe at the table of the Lord, as we celebrate World Communion Sunday. It is remarkable that in the face of many great challenges in our world, obstacles such as war and ethnic violence, the rising modern agnosticism and ardent religious fundamentalism, in the extremes of great wealth and great poverty, it is remarkable that the Christian Church still thrives in every part of our world. People in remote villages and large cities, Memonites and Roman Catholics and people of every stripe in-between, all seeking to be faithful to their call to follow Jesus Christ. .

The disciples said to Jesus, "Increase our faith." [Luke 17:5] That had been the point of this long section in Luke's gospel where Jesus had been patiently, and at times not-so-patiently, teaching his closest friends how to be faithful, how to follow him, how to carry on his work and mission after he was gone.

We have been reading these stories about discipleship for going on four months now. And still the twelve struggle to understand. And still they fail to

do what Jesus asked them to do. And still the Church of Jesus Christ survives and today, Christians in China, Cameroon and Canada, lift up the bread and the cup of the Eucharistic feast.

In our reading this morning, Jesus pulls the disciples aside for a private conversation. He had just had a confrontation with the Pharisees – the story we dealt with last Sunday – and now he says to them, "Don't be like the Pharisees. Keep in mind these two things about your life." First, never cause a little one to stumble. A "little one" in this context would be a new follower of faith. The second thing was to forgive others, not just seven times, but seventy times, meaning that our forgiveness must be unlimited.

The disciples saw this as a great challenge. And so they cried to Jesus, "Increase our faith." And Jesus tells them a short parable: "if you have faith the size of a mustard seed," he said as he pointed to a nearby mulberry bush, "you could say to it to go jump in the sea." A mulberry bush is a plant with a deep, intertwined root system that is very resistant to being transplanted. And yet, Jesus said, with faith, the bush would obey.

How is that possible? What Jesus is trying to say to his followers is that faith is not based on our ability to do the work, to build the Kingdom, or to change the world; faith is based on the power of God at

work in our lives and in our world.

Where does this type of faith come from? I am one who thinks that faith of this type takes time to develop and mature. Yesterday afternoon, we had a memorial service for Peggy Sullivan. Peggy had had no involvement in a church community for many years when she joined this church about four years ago and was baptized. During the past few months of her life she continued to struggle with whether God could really be present with her. She was embarrassed by all the caring blue cards she received from people in this congregation, some of whom she did not know. And yet, as people gathered yesterday afternoon and shared stories about Peggy, it was very apparent that she had had a tremendous impact on the lives of others. Her faith, which from her perspective was no bigger than a mustard seed, nonetheless grew to great dimensions.

The writer, Frederick Buechner, once wrote:

Faith is better understood as a verb than as a noun, as a process than as a possession. It is on-again-off-again rather than once-and-for-all. Faith is not being sure where you're going but going anyway. A journey without maps.¹

Where does faith begin? Where do we first learn about faith, about how to be faithful? Who was it that modeled faithfulness for us?

The writer of the letter to Timothy remembers fondly the faith of Timothy's mother and grandmother. We don't often hear the names of family members of the characters of the Bible, particularly the female names. But here they are, Lois and Eunice. Here are the ones who helped develop the faith of a young boy named Timothy. From watching them, Timothy intuitively knew that something important was happening when they gathered together with other Christians.

I would like to take a moment and pause, and allow us an opportunity to think about those people in our lives who helped shape our faith. It could be one of our parents, or a Sunday School teacher or someone at work, or in the neighborhood. Take a moment and see what faces and names come to mind, and then say a little prayer of thanks to God for the seed they planted in your lives.

How is faith nurtured in our lives? Taking Buechner's idea that faith is a verb, let me ask these questions. How many of you have gone on a spiritual retreat recently to grow deeper in faith? How many of you have been involved in a small group where you read together, share your lives and uphold one another in prayer? How many of you have been involved in a mission trip to a different part of the globe? How many of you have been teaching Sunday School to assure that the faith is carried into the next generation? How many of you have had a conversation with a young person to encourage them to think about a Christian vocation?

We can all be concerned about the decline of faith in our

culture. What is the greatest challenge to our faith? Is it the tragic and painful current events of our world? I think they do have impact, but the most difficult challenge we face is something much simpler, and yet something that is more sinister, it is the invitations, the events, the opportunities that come our way that compete for our loyalties, squeezing out time that used to be set aside for God's place in our lives.

Some time ago, I had a conversation with a friend of mine. Mark Burroughs was a seminary classmate of mine. He was one of those really smart guys who didn't waste his time playing Frisbee golf, and he went on to do his Ph. D. at Princeton. A few years later, he was Carolyn's professor when she was in seminary in Washington, DC. Now, Mark teaches Church History at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary in Boston.

One day, we were talking and I asked Mark a question I don't think I ever asked anyone else. I asked him, "Where did you first connect with the Christian story in your life?" He gave a remarkable answer. He said it first happened when he was very young. His parents always took him to church and he sat through the whole service. He was too young to know what was going on, to understand the meaning of the words and the actions, but would look up at his father and he could tell that what was happening was important to him. Mark knew intuitively that something really important was happening at the church.

From that small moment of insight blossomed a life of faith; one dedicated to the nurture and

training of a church pastor who, in turn, nurtures and cares for people of blossoming faith in congregations across the country.

Where does faith begin? It began when someone touched our lives with the story, and now it begins for someone else because of us. When we think about the power of that, we can only join our prayers with those of the disciples, and ask, "Lord, increase our faith."

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ⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (Harper and Row, 1973), 25