

II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you live by “If onlies?” I do. If only I had two more hours in the day—think what I could do! If only I were three inches taller—think what I could reach! **Most** people live by “If onlies.” If only I could lose those ten pounds. If only my paycheck were bigger. If only my family/my boss/my friends/my teacher/my neighbors would listen to me. If only I owned this, possessed that, then I’d be happy.

Some of the “If onlies” are tinged with regret: If only I hadn’t said those words. If only we hadn’t done what we did. If only the situation had gone another way, if only I had chosen one thing over the other, the results would have been vastly different.

In our Gospel lesson, when the disciples plead to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” I want you to hear the unspoken “If only.” If only we had more faith—think what we could do! If only we had more faith—think whom we could reach! If only we had more faith—think how successful we would be! If only you gave us more faith, Jesus—then maybe we’d be the disciples you want us to be because, frankly, right now, you’re asking an awful lot of us, too much of us.

It’s not as if the disciples hadn’t experienced some degree of “success” in their ministry, to use that term. Earlier in Luke’s gospel we read where Jesus sent his closest followers out in his name, and there had been healings and exorcisms and powerful proclamation at the hands of these disciples.

But after their foray into real ministry, they had returned to their teacher and found there was still so much to learn, so much to understand, and none of it came easily. Jesus consistently called them to a higher standard—in everything. Look, just prior to their request here for more faith, the disciples received a series of strong teachings from Jesus about life together. For example, Jesus said if a fellow disciple sins, you’re to let them know they’ve done wrong. Well, that’s not so hard, especially if you’re the type of person that likes to point out someone else’s failures. But then there were Jesus’ words about forgiveness: If someone has wronged you seven times, but then **repents**, you **must** forgive them. And these words: Woe to you if **you** cause someone to stumble into sin. The accountability expected of the disciples in this new community under Christ was overwhelming to them. Suddenly, performing healings and exorcisms and preaching to the masses looked pretty easy compared to the hard work expected of them in the common, ordinary, everyday living with each other. No wonder they asked for more faith. Increase our faith, Lord! That’s the only way we’ll ever manage to do all that you want us to do!

Luke sneaks into this story the word “apostles” in place of the word “disciples.” Typically the term “apostles” is reserved for the disciples following Jesus’ resurrection. Consider it a clue that Luke understands that Jesus’ call to a higher standard is being issued not only to the merry band of twelve who first followed Jesus, but to you and me as well, who live post-resurrection. These are the ways our Risen Lord wants his people of

every time and place to act. These are the ways he expects his people to act. The accountability we are to have to one another appears almost overwhelming. Suddenly, leading a worship service, handing out bulletins, preparing refreshments for coffee hour look pretty easy compared to the hard work expected of Christians in the common, ordinary everyday living we do with each other in the Church and the world around us. The first disciples' plea becomes our plea—we need more faith, Lord! That's the only way we'll ever manage to do all that you want us to do!

Now to Jesus' **response** to the disciples' request. On the surface, his response looks as if he's confirming their suspicions that they don't have enough faith. That they don't have what it takes. And we, overwhelmed by the burden of trying to lead Christ-like lives, might be tempted to think Jesus is saying here, "If only you had the faith of a grain of mustard seed . . . but you don't." That would let us off the hook, you know. Our "If onlies" could become "We can't." We are simply incapable of sustaining a community that lives the law of love under Christ's rule. The world is too chaotic, sin too pervasive, and we too small and ineffectual. We don't have what it takes, and it's no use trying. You're asking the impossible!

Father John Kavanaugh tells the story of a Roman Catholic sister who was a midwife, teaching and practicing in a city hospital. One day, a teenage girl came in, obviously swollen with pregnancy. She was unaware what was happening to her, uncertain who the father was, and completely lacking the support of any family. So the midwife reached out to her, promised to be with her through her pregnancy, and began a ritual of weekly visits. During these visits the midwife explained what was happening to the young girl's body and baby, taught her how to prepare for delivery, how to care for an infant. Eventually the baby was born, mother and child both fine, and resources were made available for this young mother to take care of her baby rightly.

But then the young mother and her baby just disappeared. Who knows where they had gone? Perhaps they were hungry and cold somewhere. Perhaps one or both were dead, victims to crime or neglect. The midwife worried, yet felt helpless to do anything. She developed the "If onlies." If only I could have done more. If only I'd gotten to her sooner. If only the social net of our society didn't have so many holes through which to fall, and if only I had noticed the holes were there. She began to wonder if she had what it takes to be a midwife, to be a Christian.

But **is** Jesus really saying in our Gospel lesson that the disciples don't have enough faith, that they lack whatever is necessary to be his community, and if only they had more? Is there a better way to understand Jesus' words? I think so. Jesus' response to the disciples' request for more faith can also be interpreted like this: "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed . . . **and you do . . .**" See, Jesus doesn't fall into the trap of the "If onlies."

The midwife learned, six years later, what happened to that young mother and her child. She learned when she received an invitation from the girl, now in her early twenties. It was an invitation to attend her graduation from a school for Licensed Practical Nursing. Written on the invitation were these words: "I am sorry I waited so long to thank you, but I wanted to surprise you. I wanted to be like you, since you were someone so good and loving."

The midwife spent six years saying, “If only . . .” It was when the invitation arrived in the mail that she discovered her faith **was** enough. It was enough, for she had acted on that faith, lived it out with compassion and love in the presence of a scared, pregnant teenager, and thus was able, by the grace and power of God, to do the impossible.

What did I say earlier? Jesus doesn’t fall into the trap of the “if onlies.” Nor does he wish us to. Rather, Jesus tells the disciples that they have the faith to do what he expects of them. He doesn’t need to give them more. He simply invites them to **act** on the faith they’ve already been given, live out its wonderful, amazing possibilities. The size of faith in Jesus as their Lord is not the issue. Even a small amount of faith, says Jesus, small as a teeny-tiny grain of mustard seed, can enable a person to do things one might think impossible, like commanding a mulberry bush into the sea. What does that mean for you and me? Well, it means even a small amount of faith can enable us to do things one might consider impossible, like forgiving the person who’s wronged us, or preventing another from falling into sin, or spending ourselves for the sake of someone else. The faith that enables us to do those impossible things is the faith that first holds onto our God who has himself done the impossible by defeating death and conquering sin. Filled with the faith that holds onto Him, we trust and believe that our God will continue to do the impossible—in our own lives, in our communities and in all of creation. AMEN.

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