

"Faith Enough; Faith to Spare"

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Pastor J. Stewart Hardy

Sunday, October 3, 2004  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-9;  
2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father, and Our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Trust the omelette, Dad. Just trust the omelette. That's what you're always saying to me, Dad. Trust me. Just let the pan tip forward, let it slide, and it's easy, Dad. Just toss it. Just let the omelette be. Trust it, give it some room, give it some height, and catch it in the pan. Everything will be fine!"

What Mark was trying to tell me, as he instructed me to work in his restaurant, was that all I had to do was have faith. If I couldn't have faith in myself, at least I could have faith in the omelette. Of course, most of the omelettes that I was flipping that day finished up looking like the CBS logo.

It wasn't faith that the apostles were requesting, it was an *increase* of faith; they wanted more of it. If you read the story about the apostles prior to this happening, they were looking for faith to help them face what was facing them every day. How were they to deal with the never ceasing demands of the community of faith for them to serve? And more especially, what were they to do with their sisters and brothers in faith who kept offending them? And they had to find ways to forgive them – over and over and over again. What was it they were told? Forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven.

So their request for more faith seems reasonable enough in the face of such demands. And we face demands in life, too, where we think about the quantity of faith necessary in order for us to get through things. How many times when we've wanted God to act in a specific way in a certain circumstance in our life, when it hasn't occurred, hasn't someone said to us (and cut us to the soul), that if only we'd had enough faith? It's not that we didn't have faith, but somehow faith ran short.

Like the times that we pray that a son or daughter will find a companion in life, and no companion is found?

Like the times we've had a biopsy and we've prayed in the intervening three to seven days of finding out the results that the biopsy wouldn't be malignant, only to get that fateful telephone call that tells us that the thing we'd feared is now true?

Or the times we've prayed that dad or mom or grandma or grand-pop's illness really isn't terminal the way the doctors had said, but just maybe if we pray we could get a miracle and they wouldn't be taken from us, but they died?

The son or daughter doesn't find a companion. The biopsy is malignant. The loved one dies. If only we'd had more faith. Some people say that to us, but isn't it true to say that in those circumstances, we ask that self-same question of ourselves? And we certainly ask that question when we hear the Gospel read this morning. It seems to be so obvious what Jesus is saying to the apostles, when they make their request. At least on first reading. If only we had faith the size of a mustard seed, Jesus says. Somehow or another they need more faith, don't they? Or is that what Jesus is really saying?

I'm not so sure that it is. Why do I think that way? Well first of all, I think in Jesus' comments to the apostles when they're requesting an increase in faith, is to draw attention to faith. The first is that they already have faith, and that the faith required when great things are called for is not a huge amount, but something infinitesimally small, smaller than a grain of sand, as small as a mustard seed. They already had faith.

Come to think of it, they had to have faith or Jesus wouldn't have them following him, would he? What is it, then, that they're asking? Could it be that he's telling them faith is not for the wishing away of the uncomfortable problems in life? It would be great if it worked that way. Why, we could say Tyler John has now been baptized, he's been filled with the Holy Spirit, he'll be filled with faith and he needn't worry about a thing from this day forward, forever more. But you and I know that that's not the way life is, and it certainly won't be the way life will be for Tyler John as he lives it.

When the apostles ask for an increase in faith, what they're asking for is something that will help them meet the demands of the community that seeks their services, something that will make it possible for them to continually forgive their offending sisters and brothers. Clearly, Jesus is telling them that their faith is not there to touch base, that faith is not there to wish problems away. There's simply too much talk in the Gospel about living a life that leads us through suffering and struggle, despair and debts, even into death. But that's only what happens along the way.

Instead of telling them what to do, Jesus poses them a riddle: Why don't mulberry trees with their deep-set roots, pull themselves up from the hillside and plant themselves in the sea when you tell them to do so? Peel away the metaphor and I think what Jesus is saying is, "You can't pray away your problems." In typical Jesus fashion, of course, he doesn't answer the riddle, but we're left understanding one thing: The problems of life that come upon us are not the result of a lack of faith.

The second thing is, I think, that the mulberry tree represents for us those deeply rooted problems that we encounter in our life and in our world that are intransigent, that are resistant to any form of pain. Ah Tyler John, if only we're around when you're 13, or 14, or 15, or 16 – Tim, it won't be a struggle to keep him in your arms, it will be a struggle to deal with an intransigent, unchangeable, determined young Koch . . . just like his old man. The mulberry trees of life don't magically go away because of some quantity of faith. And because we cannot change the intransigent problems before us, does not mean that we lack the faith necessary to change them.

What is this faith, then, that Jesus talks of, if it's not to trust? Just as my son attempted to have me trust the omelette to do what it would do in the air, Jesus asks us to trust God what He will do with us as obedient servants. Remember what he told the apostles: When the faithful and obedient servant has first finished working for the day, the lord of the manor doesn't call the servant to the head of the banquet table. The lord of the servant sends the servant to the kitchen to prepare the evening meal. It's only, only when the servant's final labor is concluded, that the servant is called into a luxury of meal and rest.

I think what Jesus is saying to us is that we have faith. We have the faith necessary to deal with the things in life that come upon us that we would rather have changed but find they remain the way they are. He calls us to faith in the face of intransigent things in our society that we at this moment cannot change because, if we were to have the faith that would do those things, then we would be doing everything for ourselves according to our own whims and what we felt ought to be done, instead of doing things at will and the behest of the Master.

What Jesus is telling the apostles is that through faith, through their openness to the presence of the power and the will of God, things in life that seem so terrible can be borne. That pain eventually loses its sting. And that through the struggle of things that cause us despair and grief, when they're over and past and we look back on them, we can see the presence of God that supported us in the midst of them. And the intransigent problems of our time that we would rather see changed in our society? Well, they won't be intransigent problems forever. The story of history, the story of mankind, is that society and all that is in it, eventually change. It's true of society, it's true of country, and it's true of the church itself.

The faith that we've been given is the faith to be servants, to speak a word of love, to be people of compassion, to be people of prayer. To gather around the Tyler Johns of the world when they celebrate their baptism, when they celebrate their confirmation, their engagement, their marriage, their first job, their promotions. And to stand with the Tyler Johns in the times of pain, when he himself suffers, when those he loves suffer, and when the time comes for there to be an eternal parting of the ways.

The faith Jesus talks about is a simple trust, a trust that's already present. Trust that calls us to live quietly with our faith in the world, trying to change that which we can and living with that which is unchangeable with the love and the strength given us by God. That surely is our prayer for Tyler John, and for every child of God.

Oh and this morning before I came into church, at breakfast, thinking about this sermon and thinking about Mark's lesson in tossing an omelette? I decided to flip my sunny-side-up eggs to make them once-over-lightly. It was an absolute disaster. Thankfully, Barbara was asleep and didn't see the mess in the kitchen that I had to clean up.

Amen.