

2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:(1-4) 5-10

What a way to start a story! The disciples exclaim, "Increase our faith!" Like "right here, right now." Imagine if your kids tried this. Suddenly, when you least expect it, they just blurt out, "Increase my allowance!" (By the way, kids, do NOT try this!) It could sound as if they were in a panic or a crisis. I suppose for some stories, an opening like this has a way of grabbing one's attention. This is not Luke's intent necessarily, but rather a function of the Revised Common Lectionary, and how the texts for worship each week are chosen. To make better sense of it, we really need the first four verses of the chapter:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

Luke 17:1-4

After a number of parables and verbal bouts with the Pharisees, Jesus is offering a bit of a summary of expectations of disciples. Confronted with these duties, is it any wonder they immediately cried out for an increase of faith? Overwhelmed maybe, unsure of themselves, particularly after having been sent out earlier in Luke's gospel, charged to heal the sick, and yet unable to cast a demon from a boy along the way, they may have felt their individual and group "faith gauge" was getting close to 'E.' They asked for an increase, so they must have believed they had SOME faith. And, at least they knew to turn to Jesus for their request.

In the second letter to Timothy, we can presume the purpose for writing was Timothy's own faith crisis. Based on the side of the conversation we are privy to, it seems Tim probably wrote first, expressing a need to have his faith increased, something grave enough to bring him to tears. Not having Jesus immediately present as the disciples had, Timothy turned to someone who had been his mentor or teacher, someone he felt could bolster his lagging faith.

"Faith is a principal part of the Christian life."¹ Of course, WE'VE never struggled with faith or wondered if we had enough faith to see us through, right? How do we gauge our faith? How do we know when we have enough? How do we know we DON'T have enough? And what can we do about it? Where, or to whom or what, do we turn?

Our culture and society seems to ALWAYS be interested in wanting MORE of just about anything. Why else would we have Costco, Sam's Club, BJ's selling economy-sized items? We talk about having bigger, better, faster...MORE!

¹ Augsburg Confession, Article XX, Book of Concord

Sometimes more is good, but sometimes more is just...more. Why should faith be any different? We wouldn't want to think that a neighbor down the street might have more faith than we do, right? Similarly, we also want a quick fix for any kind of shortcoming, real or imagined. Like the disciples, Timothy and a host of others before us, we may find that we need a faith booster shot. And we want it NOW! We may try all sorts of things: praying, meditating, fasting, and are we ever comfortable or confident that they are sufficient? Maybe the church needs to develop and market some sort of "performance enhancement supplement," something akin to what athletes use or we see advertised on TV:

"This is Bob. Bob's had a huge increase in his faith. He's the envy of the church. Bob's been taking the all-new, all natural Faith Enhancement Supplement. Why, he can uproot trees and replant them!"

The legal jargon that speeds by at the end or in the fine print would indicate there are no harmful side effects (except a slight risk of persecution, less than 1%) and that if your faith lasts more than 4 hours...GREAT! Don't bother calling us! Go do something with it!

Well, let me share with you a little secret. The church already offers this type of "faith supplement!" And it's as old as the church itself. We know them as sacraments.

Our Lutheran understanding of the sacraments has not changed since they were first "officially" presented in the Augsburg Confession.² In the documents that form our Lutheran heritage, the Reformers wrote, "This faith is nourished in many ways in the midst of temptations through the proclamation of the gospel and the use of the sacraments,"³ and again, "God moves our hearts through the word and [sacrament]...so that they...receive faith."⁴ In Luther's Large Catechism, he writes, "Therefore the Lord's Supper is given as daily food and sustenance so that our faith may be refreshed and strengthened and that it may not succumb in the struggle but become stronger and stronger."⁵ It's not that we are ever completely drained of faith, although we may feel like it, but it needs stirred up. The writer of the letter to Timothy offered, "*I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.*"

Be warned, though. If we start to chase the notions of "more" or "enough" when it comes to increased faith, we miss the whole idea of the Jesus brief rebuke in this lesson. What can or would we do with greater faith? Would our prayers be more effective? Would we give more? Would we just show it off by uprooting trees or through some other flashy display of power, power that we aren't meant to wield over one another but to undergird others?

² Augsburg Confession, Article XIII, Book of Concord

³ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII: Repentance, Book of Concord

⁴ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIII: The Number and Use of the Sacraments, Book of Concord

⁵ Luther's Large Catechism, Book of Concord

Jesus, not particularly known for straightforward or simple answers, doesn't tell them HOW to increase their faith or even if HE can or will grant their demand. Instead, he offers that the SIZE of our faith isn't important. Rather, what's important is that faith exists at all. What we, and the disciples, may be asking for is MORE as in quantity, but what we are provided is MORE as in intensity.

This is why those expectations in the verses that were omitted are so important to hear. Jesus KNOWS we are going to stumble; knows we will struggle to forgive over and over again. His comment about having faith the size of a teeny mustard seed is not the insult that it might seem at first glance. It can, and has, been interpreted that way. That may be one of the reasons we question our own faith. We certainly aren't manipulating nature with our faith. Instead, Jesus is confirming that they already have mustard seed faith, suggesting that such faith is a powerful thing to not waste foolishly putting it on display.

This faith we have is a gift from God, through the Holy Spirit. It was planned and provided "before the ages began." God's gracious gift of faith is NOT the divine response to our sin or our works, but in our contemporary medical insurance terms, it's a pre-existing condition. The writer to Timothy comments on the certainty that this faith is already living inside, just as it did in his grandmother and mother before him. We did nothing for it, but we get to share it. That's the part we play in the scheme of things. Timothy didn't have Jesus to turn to, so he turned to Paul. We don't even have Paul, but we have Scripture, the sacraments and each other, part of what Luther considered the Means of Grace, how God's extravagant grace is provided to us.⁶

In our faith, we can come to the sacraments fully trusting in God's promises. Out of that faith, we are called to respond in our daily relationships. In the final verses of today's gospel reading, Jesus presents contrasting images. Again, these represent the reversal that the kingdom of God is described as bringing about all through Luke's gospel. "Who would put the needs and well-being of a slave ahead of their own, particularly after the slave has already been out doing what is expected?" Instead of waiting for a show of hands, Jesus put his disciples, and us, on the spot about our behavior. "You'd all rather have someone wait on you hand and foot, wouldn't you?" Of course, all we can do is answer, "Yes." We like to be served and waited on, don't we?

In just a few moments, we will participate in the sacrament of the altar, holding in our hands the visible signs of God's grace and will toward us, for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of our faith. In that piece of bread and that sip wine, we are enhanced. It offers a foretaste and a vision of God's reversal – the Master setting the table, inviting and receiving the faithful servant who does what is expected because of the sheer expectation alone, not the reward. The Master becomes the servant, and nourishes and strengthens the servant. We do not earn this gift. It is freely given.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

⁶ Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles III.4, Book of Concord.