

Increase Our Faith

When my wife was ill with cancer, I used to put my hands on her tummy, which is where the cancer was spreading, and silently pray that God would take it all away. When it stayed, and after she died, I used to berate myself for my lack of faith. I remembered in particular the gospel lesson we heard today, of how a mustard seed of faith can move trees and mountains.

I share this part of my life because the lesson today has great potential to be misunderstood and misapplied; just as I misunderstood and misapplied it.

The statement Jesus makes about faith isn't about miracles or magic. And it isn't about circumstances that are beyond our control, like deadly illnesses. In fact, it isn't about us, you and me, having the power to do anything.

Instead, what Jesus is getting at is that faith is not like a bank account or a bushel basket of fruit. Faith isn't something to add up or multiply. Faith is God's gift to us that enables us to do things we otherwise couldn't do.

What prompted the disciples to ask Jesus to "increase our faith" was Jesus telling them of the need to forgive, over and over. The verse just before our lesson begins today is this: "If your brother does something wrong, rebuke him, and if he is sorry, forgive him. And if he wrongs you 7 times

a day, and 7 times a day comes back to you and says: 'I am sorry', you must forgive him."

It was to that hard lesson that the disciples responded with: "Give us more faith!," as in, "You want us to do what?!"

They recognized that left to their own devices, there is no way that kind of forgiveness would happen. Left to their own devices, facing and accepting the many tragedies life throws our way could not happen. Faith is the gift that allows repeated forgiveness. Faith is the gift that allows one to accept life's sharp elbows; life's great losses.

In sharing with us what God expects of us, Jesus is also telling us a great deal about who God is, and what God is like, and what we can expect from God.

Today, Jesus asks: "Who does your God look like? What is your sense of God? How does God treat us and how does God expect us to treat God?"

I'll bet there are more than a few of us who see our relationship with God like this: "If you do this for me, I'll do that for you." Or, "Oh Lord, if you will (fill in the blank), then I will (fill in the blank)." Sound familiar? My guess is it's more familiar than we care to admit.

After all, this for that, or, in the Latin, quid pro quo, it's part and parcel of our daily life. In our relationships with each other, on the job, at

the supermarket, going to the movies; nearly all of life is one transaction, one trade, after another.

Since we spend our daily lives in transactions, it's small wonder we often deal with God that way. There's a lot to be said for a transactional relationship with God. For example, it keeps you and me in control. God doesn't move unless I move. As long as I'm not asking, God's not responding. So long as I don't need God, God doesn't enter the story of my life.

Next, the exchange, when I do ask, is pretty even: you do this for me and I'll do that for you. We're square with each other. Plus, it's all very logical. Tit for tat. Quid pro quo. It's the way things should be.

And if that's how God and I relate, how much more does it say about how you and I relate to each other? About how nations relate to each other? You do good, you get a reward. You do bad, you go to jail, or get a war.

Tit for tat. Quid pro quo.

But the God of Jesus Christ blows everything you thought about a "tit for tat" God right out of the water! This God of ours has nothing to do with quid pro quo. There are no deals with this God. So if you are tempted to strike up a deal, save your breath.

That's the point of the lesson about being "mere servants, doing only our duty." No matter how I might try to fool myself, I can never put God in my debt.

At the end of the day, I am a sinful man, constantly falling short, through impatience or anger or pride or laziness, of who and what I am meant to be. But meeting my failure, at the end of the day, is the glory of God.

And the glory of our God is this: With this God, the creator of all things, in which all things abide, this God has said decisively and forever: "You belong to me." And God says that to all of us, to God's entire creation, and all that is in it. Our sins are forgiven! Our life in God is assured!

God the eternal bookkeeper or God the traffic cop or God the school marm are all inventions of our tit for tat thinking; such a god never existed.

The God of Jesus Christ says to us: "Relax." "Exhale." "I am in love with you!" "Even when you're rotten; even when you fail; even when you turn your back. You don't have the power to escape what I have I store for you."

"And what I have in store is a playground, not a war zone; a day at the beach, not a final reckoning. So 'chill out'," God says! And in the chilling ... begin to accept all of the freedom that comes from a God who has done all of the dirty work of salvation for us.

God became human and died a tortured death on the first century version of the electric chair, died a convicted criminal, and rose, and rose again, and in the dying and rising, put an end to our way of doing business.

There is no more tit for tat. No more quid pro quo. In Jesus, God has cancelled our debts. All of our debts. The slate is clean. And nothing you or I can do will dirty it again. And that includes the tax cheats and the criminals and the gossips and the killers and every rotten sort you can name. God has done the dirty work and saved us all.

You might object and say: “Wait a minute! Are you saying living a good life doesn’t matter? Changing our ways is of no account?”

No.

But changing our ways, or living a good life, these don’t get us saved. God has done the saving. And because of that, our response to this outlandish generosity of God is, at its best, the response of grateful love, of “thank you.” So I strive to improve who I am not to accumulate brownie points for heaven, but in response to God’s outpouring of undeserved love, of our undeserved adoption.

The miracle of coming to believe that God has freely, unconditionally, and finally done the dirty work for us, is this: I and you are free to be. Without judging ourselves. Without judging each

other. We are free to giggle and marvel, that, in the end, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.

We are free to participate in the overwhelming generosity of God ..., no longer living lives of quid pro quo, but living lives that give a full measure, poured out generously, overflowing, and abundantly!

This is the good news of Jesus Christ! We are free! Free at last to forgive the unforgivable sin WE committed, and free to forgive this brother, that sister, this mom or dad, that aunt or uncle, the unforgivable sin THEY committed.

The trees that are uprooted by faith are the trees of fear and anxiety. The mountains that faith tosses into the sea are the mountains of despair and hopelessness. For faith is God's free gift, and only a little bit is power beyond imagination.

So let us join with the Psalmist and sing:

“Take delight in the Lord, and he shall give you your heart's desire; commit your way to the Lord and put your trust in him, and he will bring it to pass, be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him.”

+amen