

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga  
October 2, 2022  
Year C, Proper 22  
Stewardship Discernment Season Kick-off  
*An Unspectacular Faith*  
The Rev. Leyla King

Lamentations 1:1-6  
Lamentations 3:19-26  
2 Timothy 1:1-14  
Luke 17:5-10

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

“Increase our faith!” the disciples ask Jesus. And it’s no wonder. Because, in the verses before this statement, Jesus told them that true disciples are people who look out for the weakest among them, who care more for others than for themselves, who are willing to forgive those who hurt them – even if they are hurt by the same person seven times a day! The disciples must have looked at each other and whispered together: *Could you do that? No, I don’t think so. Could you? No, no.* And so they turn to Jesus with their request: “Increase our faith!”

But, the disciples have gotten it wrong. They think “faith” is some individual power that they were at the back of the line for when it got handed out and that they got too little. But Jesus’ answer upends their assumption. First of all, the *size* of one’s faith doesn’t matter. You’ve either got faith, or you don’t, and it is all the power you need. That’s what the image of being able to tell the mulberry tree to uproot itself into the sea with your mustard-seed-sized faith is all about. It’s an exaggeration, a striking image to teach the disciples the overwhelming power of faith.

But it’s not a literal image. When I was a kid, I used to wonder, if I just *believed enough* that I could fly, perhaps I really would! But if I had jumped out of my second story window because Jesus told me faith the size of a mustard seed could do anything, it would be a sign of foolishness, not faithfulness. Faith is something very, very powerful, but it’s not the kind of power that enables magic tricks. But, if it’s not literally moving mountains and mulberry trees, what *is* faith?

That’s the second part of Jesus’ answer to the disciples. Faith, he says, is like a slave who does what he’s meant to do without expecting any kind of special reward for doing it, because that’s just his job. Jesus, of course, speaks within a society in which slavery was the norm, before its evils were named, so the image Jesus uses is problematic for us in ways it wouldn’t have been for his original listeners. But the *idea* behind this parable is still very relevant to us today. Being full of faith, *faithfulness*, Jesus tells us, is simply doing what you’re expected to do, fulfilling your job as disciples, the servants of God.

Perhaps we’re better off thinking not of slavery but of marriage. Indeed, we often talk about faith when we talk about marriage anyways. We know what faithfulness and unfaithfulness look like when in a committed relationship. So what does faithfulness to God look like? Well, it looks much like faithfulness to one’s spouse.

A week ago, I officiated the wedding of two new Thankful Ones, so the vows of marriage are fresh in my mind. Anthony and Katy promised to keep faith with each other in all aspects of their shared life together, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness or health, and even in the not-so-interesting aspects of that shared life. Faithfulness in this context means hum-drum things, the daily duties of showing kindness and gentleness to one another, serving one another when and where

needed, cooking dinner, doing the laundry, communicating well about finances or family or what you did that day, continuously offering signs of one's love and staying loyal through it all. That's what faith in marriage looks like.

Of course a spouse can show when he has been hurt by something you've done or respond with a smile when something you've done has made her happy. A spouse is someone we can see and hear and touch, and so we know how to be faithful to them. But God?

Well, the second letter to Timothy reminds us that God's grace has "been revealed [to us] through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus." We don't call him "incarnate" for nothing. Christ Jesus was flesh and blood; he lived and breathed, just like us, a human being on this earth. And if you think you can no longer see him, touch him, talk to him, think again. All you have to do is look around you and you will find Christ incarnate, flesh and blood, living and breathing, in the people who surround you. We are the body of Christ, so to be faithful to God is to be faithful to one another. In this way, then, faith is not a magic trick or a system of beliefs or a doctrine that defines each one of us. Rather, Jesus tells us, it is the daily, laundry-list of loyalty and love that we offer to one another, in the flesh, on this earth. That is what true faith is.

And, if we're honest, for some of us, this understanding of faith might be even harder to commit to than the exaggerated moving of mulberry-trees kind. Some like to be spectacular, after all, to draw attention to ourselves, to be recognized. Televangelists today play into that human desire for the marvelous. Faith for them is a spectacle of individual belief and power that knocks people over, heals them of fatal diseases, expresses itself in shouts and groans of personal devotion.

And perhaps the Spirit *is* there, in those spiritual spectacles. But Jesus' parable reminds us that where faith is found most true is not in great performances of personal belief, but in the daily duties, the loyal actions and behaviors of faith that may not be spectacular but are nonetheless powerful for all their regularity.

It is these simple acts of faithfulness in which God takes most pleasure: It's coming to church on Sundays and participating in worship to receive the grace of God. It's offering a kind word to the neighbor or peer who most annoys and frustrates you. It's praying quietly in the middle of the workday for the healing of a sick friend or the comfort of a lost soul. It's taking the time to call or text someone you haven't heard from in weeks to check in. It's sacrificing a little of your self to give something to someone in need. And, of course, as we kick off our stewardship discernment season this morning, faith looks like filling out a financial commitment card to Thankful for the upcoming year, working towards that full 10% tithe of our income, if we're not there already.

It may seem boring or hum-drum, but these are the works of faith, the means of taking part in the work of Christ in the world. No spectacle here for *others* to see and applaud; just plain old necessary, powerful faith, the kind that most pleases God who sees all our good deeds and delights in them.

And that kind of faith cannot be done alone. It requires community, the whole body of Christ. It requires being taught by and teaching one another what behaviors make a faithful life. Just as Timothy received his faith from his mother and grandmother, so too, we pass on our faith from one to another. This faith requires supporting one another when we get bored by the humdrumness of it all, or when we get exhausted by the challenge of its daily, unrelenting nature; it requires other people to whom and with whom we can show our loyalty. That's hard – and it's hard precisely

because it's not a spectacle. It's just faith – fulfilling the daily expectations of any who would call themselves servants of God and who wish to please the One they serve.

It is faith given to us by God, who always gives to us first, “more than we either desire or deserve,” and from which abundance we find the grace to give and serve others in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.