

FAITH IS NOT ENOUGH
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27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
World Communion Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

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Many of us admire people of great faith and many of us wish we had greater faith. But today's gospel lesson seems to say faith is over-rated. Is that possible?

Once upon a time, out of the blue, the disciples said to Jesus, *increase our faith*. It sounds like a noble request but Jesus seems to dismiss it with something like a joke or a light-hearted tease, which is not uncommon from a good teacher.

What? You want more faith. How much faith do you need? You're either pregnant or you're not. Well, of course, he didn't say that but he could have.

But he did say this: *if you have faith the size of tiny mustard seed you could order a mulberry tree, which by the way is famous for its deep and tenacious roots—you could order a mulberry tree to fly off into the sea and it would obey you. Or, as he put it at another time, you could order a mountain to be hurled into the sea and it would happen.*

And if that's the case, we might say to ourselves, *if you can do such things with a teeny, tiny amount of faith, I must have NO faith since I can't even find a parking space when I need one!*

But still, many of us want such faith, such power.

Maybe not to hurl mulberry trees or mountains into the sea; but it would be nice to have the power to uproot violence and millions of guns and hurl them into the sea. Or uproot injustice, bigotry, poverty and disease and hurl them into the sea. Or uproot our resentments, or fears, or the demons that torment our children and hurl them into the sea.

But that's not how the world or faith works. Magic will not save us. The quest for more faith is the wrong quest, the wrong question, and the wrong worry. Faith is necessary but it's not sufficient.

What the world needs now is love. It's the only thing that will save us. Not more faith, but more love.

As the apostle Paul put it in I Corinthians 13.

If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Faith, hope and love are great. But the greatest of these, he said, is love.

And that brings us to the rest of the gospel lesson and a rather odd illustration for the disciples of Jesus to ponder.

Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, "You look a little worn out. Come here and sit at my table?" Would you not rather say, "Prepare supper, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; and then you may eat and drink later."

Do you thank the servant for doing what was expected? So you also, when you have done all you

were ordered to do, must say, "We are just servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!"

Now, I agree. That sounds harsh and cruel and undemocratic. But it is the life of a servant. Jesus himself said, *I have not come to be served but to serve and to give my life that others might live.* Jesus, we are told elsewhere, emptied and humbled himself taking the role of a servant.

As Bob Dylan put: *you gotta serve somebody. It may be the devil or it maybe the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.*

To which we might add: It may be your self or it may be others but you gotta serve somebody. It may be your tribe, race or nation or it may be the universal kinship of God, but you gotta serve somebody.

Jesus chose to serve God, which is to say, to serve love. And thus he said, *here is my commandment: love one another. By this will the world know you are my disciples, not by your great faith, but by your love.*

Servant work is hard work. It can wear us out. But as the apostle put it in today's other lesson: *God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.* (2 Timothy 1:1-14)

And so against all odds and disheartening news we keep at it. We keep serving love.

Where there is hatred, we sow the mustard seeds of love. Where there is injury, we sow the mustard seeds of pardon. Where there is doubt, the mustard seeds of faith. Where there is despair, the mustard seeds of hope. Where there is darkness, the mustard seeds of light. Where there is sadness, we sow the mustard seeds of joy. And though it may wear us out or even kill us, that is how we are born to eternal life.

That is what the servants of love do. By our baptism, that is our duty. That is our calling. That is our privilege. Faith, hope and love are great. But the greatest of these is love.