

The Quantity of Faith

All the readings today have a common theme to them. That is not usually the case since the second reading is typically a semi-continuous reading of one of the letters from the New Testament. However, one does need to take special notice when all three readings are connected. The theme that is common to these readings, as well as the Psalm, is the theme of faith. A secondary theme would be one of patience. Faith seems to be one of those words where it is known what is, but actually hard to put into words. Perhaps the author of the letter to the Hebrews put it best when he wrote that faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." Synonyms for faith are trust and belief and while they are synonyms, both of these words give a little different emphasis on the concept. There is the school of thought that with enough faith, anything can be overcome. If it is not overcome, then the person either did not have enough faith or the right kind of faith. In this instance, faith is seen as a commodity, something in which we can obtain on our own.

But consider this illustration from Scottish theologian Donald Baillie:

"Let us imagine the case of a small child, a little boy, entrusted to the care of a nursery governess. When she arrives, the little fellow is taken into the room where she is and left in her care. But she is strange to him, he does not trust her, but looks distantly at this strange woman from the opposite corner of the room. She knows that she cannot do anything with him until she has won his confidence. She knows she has to win it. The little boy cannot manufacture it, cannot make himself trust the governess. His faith in her is something which he cannot create - only she can create it.

And she knows that she cannot create it by forcing it; she has to respect the personality of the child; and to try to take the citadel by storm would be worse than useless, and would produce fear and distrust instead of confidence...She sets

about her task gently, using various means - words, gestures, and smiles, and perhaps gifts, all of which convey something of the kindness of her heart. Until at last the little fellow's mistrust is melted away, she has won his confidence, and of his own free will he responds to her advances and crosses the floor to sit at her knee. Now that her graciousness, using all these means, has created his faith, she can carry on the good work she has begun." (Measure of Faith (2 Timothy 1:1-4, Luke 15:5-10) by John Rollefson in "the Christian Century", September 21, 2004, p 21). This illustration shows that faith is not something that we can obtain, rather it is something that the object of our faith instills in us. Any quantity of faith that we have is the result of what the object of our faith, that in which we place our trust, does for us.

If getting faith is not something which we do, but is in response to something done for us, then how do we increase this faith? I think that Jesus tells the disciples that this is the wrong question to ask, it is the wrong perspective from which to see our faith. The assigned Gospel reading in the lectionary begins at verse 5, where the apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. However, I included the first 4 verses because it provides the reason for why the apostles asked the question in the first place. In these first 4 verses, Jesus talks of being a stumbling block for people wanting to learn about Jesus and about forgiveness. By asking Jesus to increase their faith, they are basically asking Jesus to help them not lead anyone astray as well as being able to forgive someone.

The point Jesus was making about the mustard seed is that the mustard seed can only be a mustard plant. If the seed itself aspired to be something else, it could not happen. For the mulberry tree to be put into the sea, the faith of the mustard seed needs to look to the source of its faith. Just as faith is 'given' to the mustard seed to be what it is supposed to be, this same faith looks to its Maker to do what the Maker sees or wants needs to be done. It isn't the faith of

the mustard seed itself that moves the tree to the sea, but the source of that faith.

It is the same with us. If we want something to happen, then it is our faith that God will make it happen. However, we must remember that we are not to just "let go and let God" for everything. In the second parable about the slave, the slave still does what the master wants done. The slave does not "let go and let the master" do everything. The slave does the slave work and feels a sense of accomplishment in doing that work. So where is the line between doing what we can and should do and letting God do it? When do we know if what we are doing is something that we want to do or something that God wants us to do? Those can be very difficult questions to answer. However, if we recall the last couple of Gospel readings from Luke 15 and 16, then we can get a good start to the answer to those questions. Recall that in the two previous chapters, Jesus talks about the need for the law and the Gospel and that both are necessary. By over-emphasizing the law, we become like the Pharisees whose focus was on doing all that the law required and as long as they did that, then they believed that they were righteous. However, this is placing their faith in the law and not the source of the law. By over-emphasizing the Gospel, we would then rely on 'cheap grace' as Bonhoffer stated and just sit back and let Jesus do everything, waiting for the Second Coming. Or we could take the attitude that we can do whatever we want because Jesus already gave us forgiveness and as long as believe that, then we will be ok. As you can see, these two extremes pose problems for us.

We must keep in mind that Jesus is not necessarily calling us slaves and that we should just shut up and do our work. Elsewhere in the Scriptures we are called 'children of God' as well as 'heirs to the Kingdom' and Jesus even refers to us as 'brothers and sisters.' What Jesus is telling us to do is that we should have enough trust in God so that if a mulberry tree or mountain should be moved into the sea,

then God will make sure that it is done while we do what we are called to do as a child of God. By having the confidence in the Gospel of Jesus that the relationship between us and God has been properly restored, we can take the 'risk' of following the law to help others, not reaching for more out of selfish reasons, but reaching for more for others so that they may live in the same good grace that we do, using the law to guide our actions towards others, realizing the limits of the law and that it points us to Jesus, we will be more than slaves, more than just pawns in the game of life. It all starts in where do we place our trust, our faith? When we properly place our trust in God, then we need to have the patience for God to act on God's time.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: https://youtu.be/YcUdi_WIPms

Service: <https://youtu.be/kQkN1wMUcjk>