

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Psalm 37:1-10

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

Every now and then I wish.....if only for a few minutes.....that we had a video tape of Jesus. Wouldn't that be fantastic? We could see him move. We could see his body language and the expressions on his face. And we could hear the tone of his voice and the inflections that he gives to his words. A video tape would give us a much better idea of what he is saying to us. Having only the written word to use to decipher what he is trying to tell us is a little bit like trying to figure out what's in an e-mail.....is this person being facetious? Are they being sarcastic? Are they saying this seriously and with a straight face? Is this a light-hearted tease or is someone simply being mean? We miss a lot when all we have to go on is the written word.

Such is the case today with this exchange between Jesus and his disciples. If only we could see and hear Jesus, we could be a bit more certain of his meaning. But we can't. We have only one medium to go by.....the written word.

We know that sometimes what Jesus says to his disciples, or even to the crowds listening to him, can sound pretty harsh. There's nothing easy or simplistic about being a Christian. Some of the things Jesus requires are very difficult. There is a price to pay for being one of his disciples. Sometimes it's really costly. The few verses that come just before the ones we have just heard explain what will happen if someone leads another person astray. Jesus says it would be better for them if they were drowned. And if one of our fellow disciples sins, we are supposed to rebuke that person and then forgive them, if and when they repent. We are actually supposed to forgive them repeatedly, if necessary, for the same offense committed multiple times.

None of these things are easy to do, so we shouldn't be surprised to hear the disciples saying to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" We can't possibly do as Jesus is asking us to do with the amount of faith that we have. We need more!! The way Jesus answers sounds like a reproach. He tells them that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they would be able to tell a mulberry bush to be uprooted and replant in the sea.....and it would do that. In the gospel of Matthew, when the disciples come to Jesus complaining that they weren't able to cast out demons even in his name, Jesus tells them that if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, they would be able to tell a mountain to move from here to there..... and it would.

All of my life, I have interpreted these admonitions from Jesus as reproaches. It just seemed to me that he was saying to them, "You don't have enough faith. You don't even have faith as big as the miniscule mustard seed." The statement sounds like a criticism to me.

But what if that *isn't* what he means? What if Jesus is talking about the value of faith that is actually smaller than the miniscule mustard seed? Surely these folks have already demonstrated a certain amount of faith.....faith in Jesus. They have left their homes, their families, and their way of life to take up a new way of life that is centered around Jesus. What if we could hear Jesus and see Jesus? What if we could see the expression on his face.....maybe a slight smile and a little glint in his eye? What if he chuckled just a bit before he spoke? What if we could hear a soothing and encouraging voice saying those words? Faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains or replant shrubs. What if Jesus' message is, "You don't need that much. What you have is enough to do what I have asked you to do."

PAUSE

Back in the Dark Ages.....the 1950's.....there was a jazzy little jingle in a commercial about a men's hair product called Brylcreem. The tagline was, "A little dab'll do ya'" Maybe Jesus is telling the disciples the same thing about faith.....a little dab'll do ya'. You don't need much. What you have is enough. What a difference that would make in how we understand Jesus' message here. Maybe he isn't reproaching us after all. Maybe he is reassuring us and encouraging us to act with what we have.

So what does Jesus mean by the word 'faith'? What do we mean when we say it? Is it something intellectual or something emotional? Can it be both? Can it be measured.....by the spoonful, by the cup, by the gallon, by the bushel? What is faith and how do we measure it?

In St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews, he says that 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' It's believing without proof. And how can we possibly measure that? It's not something that can be quantifiable.

Faith is very often experiential. We can't see it, but we experience something that convinces us to believe. All of you can probably remember these kinds of experiences in your own life.

What comes to my mind is the whole experience of learning how to swim. Do any of you remember learning how to swim? I remember it vividly because I was scared to death. I felt certain that if I fell into the water I would sink to the bottom and never come up again. I kept being told that if I fell in to water I would bob back up to the surface like a cork. I saw that that's what happened with the other kids, but I was convinced that I was not made of cork material, I was made out of stone and would instantly sink to the bottom and stay there. You can imagine

my surprise when I finally relaxed enough to stretch out on top of the water and realized that I could float. What a sensation!! And what a relief!! I could float even if the water splashed over my face or got in my eyes. The buoyancy of the water held me up. Imagine that God's grace is like that body of water. Imagine that God's grace will buoy us up against all calamities even when the water gets in our eyes. We can't see the buoyancy and we probably can't adequately describe it, but that doesn't make it any less real. We have experienced it and no one will be able to talk us out of it. It's a little bit like faith.

Having faith is not an indication of always being strong and keeping a stiff upper lip in hard times either. There are always times when we wonder.....and wonder justifiably, "Where is God?" Even the psalmist this morning struggles with the injustice in the world and the flourishing of the evil-doers. For every person who pursues faith, there are sometimes doubts. And as we struggle with the doubts and we eventually come to a new and deeper understanding. We build our faith. It gets stronger. Those are the times when we need to do as the psalmist advises: we need to be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. Being still and waiting patiently requires trust in God and faith in God.

It's not really a matter of how much faith one has.....as we've seen, it can't be measured anyway and we need less of it than we think we do in order to do what Jesus has called upon us to do. What matters is where we place our faith. In whom do we invest our faith? If we have invested it in God and in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit we shouldn't ever be surprised when our meager bit of faith.....smaller than a mustard seed.....grows into something huge and wonderful in the hands of the Almighty.

Jesus ends this lesson by talking about what is expected of slaves and masters. St. Paul often refers to himself as a slave of Jesus Christ or even Jesus' prisoner. Jesus himself described himself as a servant to all, not a master, and yet those who followed him then and those who follow him now, gladly refer to this servant of mankind.....this servant of God.....as our master. He has given us directions about what he wants from us and how he wants us to behave with each other and with the world. He has also reminded us that we have been given all the faith we need to follow his instructions. We have enough. So Jesus sends us on our way well-equipped with our marching orders and our objectives trusting in him and in the faith we have. He sends us out into the world to love God and to love our neighbors; to work for justice and peace; to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to demonstrate the kingdom of God wherever we can and whenever we can and however we can for as long as we can. Are we ready? Are we willing?

There's no reason why we can't. Right here at St. Paul's and every day in our daily lives. We can be kind. We can notice people aren't usually noticed. We can smile at someone who might not get another smile from anyone else all day long. We can stand beside those who are in trouble

or who need our support. These are the things that Jesus requires from us. These are our marching orders. And as Jesus says about the masters and the slaves, we don't do it for gratitude. We don't do it so that we will be thanked. We do it because Jesus asked us to.

If we have any doubts, all we need to do is remember the contemporary commercial slogan from Nike: "Just do it!"

We have all the faith we need.....and as we "Do it!", our faith will increase.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.