

## **Increase Our Faith!**

*A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman*

*October 7, 2007*

*Luke 17:1-7*

On this World Communion Sunday, we come with us an awareness of the conflict and struggles in our lives and among the many different peoples of Earth. We are aware of the news in our own community this past week of 3 youth being shot in what is said to be gang related violence. A fourteen year old has been arrested for the crime. We have learned that the White House has permitted certain kinds of interrogation of prisoners of war that most of us would consider to be torture. We read the news each day of the ongoing occupation in Iraq.

And in our personal lives – we have our own challenges. The challenge is to do our job well without letting it consume us. To engage in our studies at school without letting our grades define us. To take the time to nurture our own spirits in the midst of so many demands on our time and energy. To be generous with our money and gifts and talents when we fear we do not have enough to care for ourselves and our families – especially if an emergency were to come.

It is hard to trust in God when life is so complex. We yearn for the peace that passes all understanding, and yet, we are reluctant to allow ourselves to be that vulnerable with the God who offers us that grace. And so today, we come to this table – as do Christians all around the world – to participate in this sacrament of hope. This sacrament of liberation. This sacrament of faith. We come with our yearning and with our reluctance.

The disciple's have been called to lead in a way that is very hard. Jesus has offered them two teachings – first, to not do anything that would cause the “little ones” to stumble. That is a reference to those who are new, or young, in their faith. And secondly, to forgive those in the community who cause you injury or harm. And not just once. But over and over again.

The eager disciples know that this is going to be hard. So it is after these instructions by Jesus that they plead – Jesus, increase our faith!

And Jesus responds in a very interesting way. He offers an illustration of a very small seed – the mustard seed – and says – if you have faith – and in this he is not suggesting that they don't have faith – but is saying if you only have faith in the amount of a small mustard seed – it is enough! Because it is God's power that can make the difference. It is by God's power that the world is saved and that grace abounds.

I have really struggled with this text. It can come across as if we are not responsible for anything – that it is all up to God. That feels slippery to me, and it does not feel true to my experience of life or faith. And yet, there is a part of it that does feel true.

What seems important to me is this. The illustration is not meant to say that from very small things come great big things – although sometimes that is surely true. Rather, the point Jesus is making is that faith lays hold of God, and with God, nothing is impossible. It is God who gives us our strength, and God will give us all that we need. It is God who gives us courage. It is God who gives us the ability to forgive, to love, to offer peace in the midst of violence.

In the words of one person – faith is opening ourselves to God’s power.

In other words, we are not responsible for knowing it all. We are not responsible for being brilliant or having all the right answers. Our responsibility is more basic than that – it is to be open to the power of God in our lives and to let that power live in us. And for this, we get no extra credit. We get no special rewards. We have chosen to live the life of faithful people, which is to follow Jesus in his ways of loving and caring for all the people of Earth. As we learn more and more to open ourselves to God, we will learn more and more how to let our faith carry us through our days. To trust in God’s presence to lead us – no matter what our day may bring. And that will make all the difference.

If we can open ourselves to God in this way, I believe peace is possible. I believe the world can be healed of its violence and woundedness. I believe God will heal our souls. I believe God will heal Earth. But I don’t know how to make this easy. I don’t know how to say it in a way that gives us an aha! Experience this morning. Maybe Jesus didn’t know how to do that either. The followers of Jesus seemed to struggle just as much as we do in understanding how to have such faith.

What I do know is that Jesus really believed this. Believed that God gives us all we need. Believed that God wants us to have our lives and to love our lives. That God is all forgiving and all loving – and full of grace. And yet, God does not do this for us. God invites us to join in creating a world where love and truth and justice prevail. God seems to need us to do our part.

And what I think our part is is this – we are to open ourselves to God’s power and allow that power to come to life in us. That we might not be afraid, that we might love our neighbor and our enemy, that we might even love ourselves. This is faith. Opening ourselves to God. Allowing God’s power to be in us. Trusting God with our lives.

I wish there was a great story I could tell to make this come alive. But I don’t have one today. What we do have is this table. It is a table of grace. It is a table that Jesus has set for us and where Jesus invites us to come. Here we find bread and wine. Here we come as a community – each of us with our own challenges and all of us with the struggles of the world. We come to this table to open ourselves to God again. We come because we yearn for God’s peace. We come because we seek to live our lives fully. We come because we are in need of being filled with God’s presence and power again.

Faith is opening ourselves to the power of God. It is saying, Here I am God. It is saying, use me God. It is saying – God, I want to live with this power in my life – but don’t know

how. It is saying – God, take my life and let it be, consecrated more to Thee. It is saying – help me God to see. Help me to know. Help me to love. Help me to soften my rigid places and be open to your grace. It is saying – God, take away my reluctance to trust and fill me with your spirit again.

Faith is opening ourselves to the power of God. And if we all can do that a little more, if all of us all around the world can do that a little more each day, the realm of God may just come here on Earth.