

Small Faith

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

Psalm 37:1-10

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

How many of you know how to ride a bicycle? How many of you have helped teach someone else how to ride a bicycle? I remember helping to teach my daughters how to ride bikes. Where we lived, there was zero pavement. Riding bikes on gravel is hard for anyone, but especially when you're learning. We ended up taking them to a friend's house with a huge, paved driveway. You know how this works. They had to walk with their feet, getting knocked by the pedals, with their legs stretched out to the side while they learned to balance. Eventually they would risk putting their feet on the pedals while we pushed them to give them some momentum. It took some time, but they eventually did learn to ride on their own, to the joyful shouts of the watching friends and family members.

Faith, like balancing on a bicycle, begins when we dare to take our feet off the ground and trust that we will be upheld.

In our gospel lesson today, we hear the disciples ask Jesus to "increase our faith". Rather than prescribing a Bible reading plan or a rigorous daily meditation schedule, Jesus tells them they don't need their faith increased at all. He points to the smallest seed he can find to illustrate the size of the faith required. Then he indicates the tree with the strongest roots and tells them the seed sized faith can uproot that mighty tree with nothing more than a simple command.

This teaching on faith falls between two stories where the disciples imagine what is being asked of them requires more than they can possibly do. Rather than tell them to do more, be more, work harder, Jesus simply tells them that the smallest act of faith is sufficient to accomplish the impossible. When it comes to faith, it isn't about quantity. Like a child learning to ride a bike, to be successful we don't have to be great, but we do have to lift our feet off the ground and find our balance in a new way.

We tend to have a lot of weird ideas about faith. We listen to stories about the historic heroes of the faith and imagine they were somehow different than us. They had some knowledge or power or framework that was far superior to us mere mortals. But Our readings today indicate that faith is not tidy, it is not slick and polished, and it isn't always pretty. Faith, according to Jesus is not about the size of our capacity or an appearance of righteousness; it's about our willingness to step down on it and trust it to support us.

I don't mean to shock anyone, but today I am going to give a three-point sermon. Three points from our readings that explain faith. It needs to be no larger than a seed; but faith is honest, it is intentional, and it welcomes assistance.

First, faith is honest. Christians often seem to think that faith must look presentable, that it must be pious and religious. But that is rarely the kind of faith written about in the pages of Scripture. Biblical faith shows up amid the griminess of real life, through salty tears and throats raw from calling out for help. Exhibit A comes is today's reading from the prophet Habakkuk. Habakkuk was angry at God. "How long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?... Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?... Destruction and violence are before me... justice never prevails."

Habakkuk lived during a time of intense political corruption, exploitation, and social injustice under King Jehoiakim. He should have been mad. People were suffering, things were getting worse fast, and he was called to be a prophet to a world that ignored his voice. Habakkuk was honest before God, and you know what? God didn't rebuke him. In fact, Habakkuk's honesty pulled a response from God. It wasn't the answer he wanted, but God listened and answered with hope. The entire book of Habakkuk illustrates an ongoing dialogue, a picture of an open and real relationship that built Habakkuk's faith and consequently built the faith of generations of people who have read his words since.

In Paul's letter to Timothy, he doesn't try to sugarcoat his experience either. Paul was writing from prison. His tie was not on straight. He was dirty, hungry, and suffering. He did not appeal to Timothy based on the salary a life of faith would produce, nor of the respect it would grant. In fact, his appeal says, "join me in suffering for the gospel". People whose lives are lived by faith understand that faith is not always accompanied by a pressed suit. Faith can be sweaty work, but Jesus lived in human flesh as a servant who washed stinky feet, and our God invites us into fellowship through the grittiness of our genuine, honesty. We don't have to freshen up our lipstick before joining into Christian fellowship or approaching God.

So, point one is that faith is honest. Point two is that faith is intentional. Our honest responses to God based on our experiences in this life, may occasionally take the form of Habakkuk's fist raised towards God. Even so, faith invites us to move intentionally towards God. Faith doesn't allow our feelings to have the last word.

Today's Psalm is a perfect example of David's instructions to himself. Based on the first verse, he is clearly battling anxiety and jealousy. Rather than allowing himself to be consumed by those feelings, he intentionally instructs himself and his readers to stop fretting and trust God. David's faith looked past his immediate circumstances and into the character of the God he loved. He was intentional with what he allowed his mind to think and even with what he chose to linger in his heart. In the middle of his fear, he recognized his soul's need to feed on good things and to delight in God. He intentionally moved towards God, even when he felt threatened and afraid.

Paul echoes David's same instructions regarding the intentionality of the life of faith in his letter to Timothy. Rather than floating through life, assuming his faith will always come easily and remain unchallenged, Paul encourages Timothy to rekindle his faith. He calls faith the gift of God and implores him to care for it as we would any treasured gift. Paul says, "guard the good treasure entrusted to you". Guarding it as a treasure and training our hearts and hands how to navigate through this life are all intentional

acts. It doesn't take a large amount of faith to make choices to live intentionally.

Sometimes, when we look to God from our pain and weakness, our faith is as small as a seed. But intentionally moving towards God is the choice faith makes, even, and sometimes especially when our hope is hanging by a thread.

We have seen that faith is honest, and it is intentional. Point three is that faith welcomes assistance.

Paul reminds us that it is God's Spirit within us that makes our faith possible. God's spirit, working out through our lives, imbues power, love, and self-discipline. We may not have any power or love or self-discipline, but God's Spirit in us certainly does. Paul goes on to invite Timothy's participation by "relying on the power of God". And he closes his appeal by saying the outworking of the life of faith is accomplished "with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us". I know we're Americans, we thrive on rugged individualism, we've been raised to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and get on with it. But that is an American ethic, it doesn't come from Jesus. In God's kingdom, the weak are made strong through the power of God, not their own determination. As long as we are looking to our own strength to inflate our faith, we're missing the point. We don't need larger faith; we only need to look to the source of all faith to supply what we lack.

God doesn't want us to fasten on a pretty mask before approaching with our honest feelings. God just wants us to come, even if our appearance is disheveled and we are really feeling our feelings. Come. And be intentional. Choose to come and choose to keep coming. Be intentional with our internal lives, guard and kindle the direction of our hearts towards God and others. And welcome the assistance God offers us through the Spirit. We need help and it is readily available; we only need look.

May we be a people who live our faith honestly, intentionally, welcoming God's help so that we can join Paul and all the saints saying, "I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him".

