

A Sufficient Faith

After college, before I went back to seminary to become a priest, I spent a few years teaching high school English. I taught literature to freshmen and a college preparatory writing class for seniors. One of the hardest things to teach my students was to recognize tone in writing. So much in communication depends upon someone's tone – are they agreeing or being sarcastic, joking or being condescending, angry or just uninterested? Who hasn't either misinterpreted someone or been misinterpreted in an email exchange or other written communication? Part of the reason tone is so difficult to discern is that we read things in our own voice in our head, so we have a tendency to impute our own feelings on the other person.

I bring this up because I think it is often hard to determine exactly what Jesus is saying in gospel passages because it depends on what tone we read the text with. And that depends so often on what we bring to the table when we read – our own ideas about God, the requirements of faith, and the inadequacies of our works. Far too often I read Jesus tone as angry and condemnatory, but that probably has to do with my own faith hang-ups. It's easy to read his words here with that sort of tone.

Jesus had just told his disciples, in the first verses of chapter seventeen, that if anyone offended them, they should simply tell the person, and if that person repented, it was required that the disciples forgive them. As anyone who has ever been truly hurt knows, forgiveness can be a difficult task. So the disciples say to Jesus, "Increase our faith." Jesus tells them if their faith was even as much as a tiny mustard seed they could do extraordinary feats. Then he launches into an analogy about a slave simply doing the work they were commanded to do.

It's easy to read Jesus as dismissive here. He's given them so much, they ask for more faith, and so he responds exasperated, "if you have faith even the size of a mustard seed you could command trees to uproot themselves." And to punctuate his point he compares them to slaves and tells them that they should simply do what they are ordered to do and not complain about it or question it. It's a plausible reading, because sometimes Jesus does show signs that he is tired of his followers.

But what if we try reading it with a different tone. What if we picture the God of the universe as a being that is so thoroughly for us that he became incarnate to live among us, and so wrapped up in explaining the power of the universe to us in terms we could understand that he took on human form and walked around with normal people, conversing in their own language. In other words, what if we took Jesus at his word that he is who he says he is and tried reading the text like that.

In that case, after Jesus has just told them to do something rather difficult – to forgive anyone who has wronged them and repents and seeks their forgiveness. They respond in the very human way of saying, that sounds hard, and like it might take more faith than I have, so they ask for an increase of faith. And Jesus responds by saying, "if you have even a mustard seed worth of faith (which clearly you must because you believe in Jesus enough to think he can grant your request) then you can do things that seem impossible, like commanding a tree to be uprooted and

thrown into the sea with just the sound of your voice.” Maybe that is simply Jesus’ way of saying, “you can do this And then he goes on to tell them a story that basically amounts to, saying don’t wait around for me to pat you on your back for doing what you know you’re supposed to do because I have already told you to do it. You have everything you need, now go and do it. In that tone, the passage sounds more like a pep talk from a tough love sort of parent or coach.

You see, the disciples were looking at faith like it was a commodity that could be increased and stockpiled. But faith isn’t like that. Faith is a posture, a way of seeing the world, and an action to be lived out. The economy of faith is not transactional – you store some up here, so that you have more to pay out later on the really big thing that requires more faith. It doesn’t work like that. Faith is experiential; it is all about doing it, living it in a given situation. God is saying stop wanting more and do something with what you have. In other words, faith was not something they needed more of but simply more practice with, like so many things in life.

Let me tell you what I think practicing that faith looks like. Think about the times we pray for more faith, and what it would be like to simply act upon the faith we have. We pray, “Lord I am nervous about this interview, or this procedure, or this test tomorrow, give me the faith to make it through.” Practice your faith by thinking of all the times that God has been with you through difficult situations and sustained you, and rest in that. Increased faith is remembering the practice you have had and live into it in this new instance, even if it is scary. Or we ask God, “Lord give me the faith to believe that my child or my dear friend will make it through this trying time.” And maybe the answer is, ‘you have everything you need to simply go sit with them and let them know they are not alone and hold their hand through the trial.’ Increased faith looks like being present to them, even if you don’t know what to say, because it reminds them that they are not alone, and trusting that that is enough. Or like the disciples in the story who had been told to forgive, we pray, “Lord give me the faith in my heart to forgive this wrong done to me.” And the answer is to practice the faithful act of forgiving, of saying that someone is forgiven and outwardly moving on to embrace reconciliation over vengeance, and having faith that the inward change of heart will come. We ask God to change our hearts so that we can love someone when the answer is simply to love them the way we know God wants us to and it will change our heart. If you are praying about it, you already have enough faith, because you already believe there is a God who listens and will help you. That God is with you, making your faith enough to match the situation.

This all comes from the same place. The part of me that would initially read Jesus’ words in this passage as angry or dismissive, is the part of me that thinks I don’t have enough faith to do the things that I know I am supposed to do. That’s why I am conditioned to think Jesus is going to respond to me with anger. But maybe here he is saying, whatever you have, as tiny as your faith seems, it is more than sufficient for the task. It is enough. I just need you to go and do it, and then you will see that it is enough, you will experience faith in action and that is everything.

And Jesus is telling us that we shouldn’t expect a pat on the back every time for doing exactly what we know we are supposed to do. So many things in life seem to take more faith than we would believe we have, from raising children to caring for aging parents, from working with the utmost integrity to nurturing loving relationships in your personal life, from facing life’s great tribulations to making it through the day-to-day slog while believing that there is progress

being made. That is where the daily miracles happen – in using the faith we have to meet the circumstances that arise every day. That’s just what you are supposed to do. It’s just what God expects – for faithful people to live faithfully, for people who have experienced the love of God to make that love felt, for people who know God’s grace personally to make it known to others.

I think Jesu is saying, I’m not going to pat you on the back for doing what we both know you should do in this situation, but you have everything you need to do it, so go practice. You have the faith you need to meet the situation that arise, and that is a miraculous thing. Now go and practice it every day in every way. Amen