

THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 2, 2022

HABAKKUK 1:1-4, 2:1-4 | PSALM 37:1-9 | 2 TIMOTHY 1:1-14 | LUKE 17:5-10

There's an old episode of Seinfeld where George breaks up with his girlfriend but then realizes that he left a bunch of books at her apartment. Since he's George, he shows up at Jerry's apartment at his wit's end trying to figure out how to get them back. Jerry, blasé as ever, asks, "Didn't you read them?... What do you need them for?" George shrugs and replies, "I don't know. They're books."

Jerry's question—*What do you need them for?*—is a simple question, but it's a good one. Like George, we often find ourselves spinning into grand plans and complicated strategies and perilous endeavors for the future without stopping to ask why we're actually doing any of this in the first place. We want the books more than anything in the world, but we're not exactly sure why we want them.

There's something similar going on in today's gospel reading. The disciples approach Jesus and say, "Increase our faith!" You can hear echoes of George Costanza in their plea. On its face, it's not a bad request. At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus and the disciples have been together for some time. And Jesus's impression of their faith seems mixed. Sometimes Jesus seems rather impressed by their trust and commitment. Remember the confession of Peter from chapter nine. Or consider their willingness to be sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God in chapter ten. But other times, Jesus chides them for not having more faith. Think about the story from chapter eight where the disciples hunker down in their boat while Jesus calms the storm, leading Jesus to remark, "Where is your faith?"

So we might expect Jesus to respond to their request by saying, "Finally. Yes, let's increase your faith. We can cancel all of our plans for the day and just focus on that." But that's not what Jesus does. He says this weird thing about trees. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." Jesus seems to be suggesting that even a little bit of faith can make a big difference. Jesus can transform a small bit of trust into something much more profound.

But then why doesn't Jesus just increase their faith? This is where it's helpful to return to Jerry's question: *What do you need it for?* The disciples' answer seems to be the same as George's: *I don't know. It's faith, Jerry!* Faith is good, so it would be better to have more of it. But it's the disciples' inability to give a reason for this request that may be part of the problem.¹

We often talk about faith in sort of vague, amorphous language, but we tend to assume it has three main characteristics. Faith is individual, intellectual, and quantifiable. Individual meaning that it comes from whatever's inside of you. Intellectual meaning it's about knowledge. And quantifiable meaning you can measure it much like you measure your blood pressure.

For example, when I'm at visitations and funerals, I'll often overhear someone say to the bereaved, "Don't let this death lessen your faith." Social graces aside, it's a revealing way to talk about faith because it hits all three of those characteristics. It assumes faith is individual. Your faith is something going on inside of you that I can't do anything about besides telling you to not mess this up. It assumes faith is intellectual. You're going to start thinking about stuff and that might

¹ There's an interesting comparison here with Matthew 17, where the request comes after the disciples are unable to heal a boy with epilepsy.

cause problems for your faith. And it assumes faith is quantifiable. You will probably have less faith next month than you do now. You used to have 800 faith points, now you have 750.

Thinking of faith that way is like drinking an entire pot of coffee.² It feels fantastic for about five minutes, and then it just leaves you a jittery mess. Because it will either make you proud of your faith as if it is your own achievement, puffing up your own ego and making you feel superior to others for no reason. Or it will make you ashamed of your faith, wondering why you can't be better and why there's something wrong with you.

But faith is not some personal attribute that you have. It's not something that emerges from within you. It's not something needs to be monitored and kept in check like a credit score. And it's not a conclusion that we come to after poring over arguments.

Faith is a gift that comes from God. God creates faith in us.³ So we don't need to be anxious about whether we've mustered up enough faith or whether we used to have more faith or whether other people have better faith than we do. If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, Jesus says, that's fine.

And perhaps that's why Jesus is a little less enthused at the disciples' request than we might expect. When Jesus talks about how faith as small as a mustard seed can realign creation, he seems to be suggesting that the disciples are missing the point. The real problem the disciples have isn't that they don't have enough faith, it's that they don't know what the faith they do have is for. And that's precisely what Jesus is interested in. *Increase our faith! Well, what do you need it for?*

Because faith is always *for* something. God gives us the gift of faith so that we can love our neighbors. You see that again and again in St. Paul's letters, that growth in faith is paired alongside growth in love. We heard a passage from 2 Timothy today, which was written by some of Paul's followers, and they picked up that exact theme. "Hold to the... faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Faith without love is just a spiritual prosperity gospel. Love without faith is just being polite. But faith and love together? Faith and love together can redeem the world.

The way I've always explained this to you is God *for us so that*. God acts for us. God gives us the gift of faith. God forgives our sins. God grafts us into the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. And God acts for us so that we can love our neighbors. So that we can live our vocations in the world. So that we can serve with joyful hearts.

Because faith is a gift, there's nothing wrong with asking God to increase our faith. That's a fantastic thing to pray for. You may have even noticed that we did just that in the prayer of the day for today: "When we are weak in faith, strengthen us." But unlike the disciples in today's gospel reading, we have a reason we want God to increase our faith. Not just because it's faith. But so "that with fervor we may love our neighbors and serve them."

Whenever we focus not on whether we have the right faith or enough faith, Jesus says, "You have enough faith. What do you need it for?" For justice. For peace. For love. For hope.

Just a mustard seed of faith can move a tree into the sea of Galilee. So imagine how much the faith God creates in each and every one of us can renew and redeem God's creation.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² Shout out to Bill Joseph.

³ Art III of the Apostles Creed in the Small Catechism: I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.