



SUNDAY SERMON

Faith Vision

The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 17, verses 5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "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. Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

A reading from the book of the Prophet Habakkuk, chapter 1, verses 1-4 and chapter 2, verses 1-4

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted. I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

DATE

The Twentieth Sunday
after Pentecost
Sun., Oct. 2, 2016

PREACHER

The Rev. Kate Heichler

READINGS

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 37:1-10
II Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

Last week we held a gathering of leaders here. We were asked two questions: Why are you a Christian, and why are you a Christian who attends church? The answers at my table were things like ... "I love this community," "We do such great outreach," "I want my kids to grow up with values." These are all great reasons to be connected to a church community. Yet, I thought, you can get good values at a synagogue. Volunteer with non-profits. Get a feeling of community at a book group or yoga class. Why bother with all this?

Another answer to that question, which might have emerged had we talked longer is: "St. Columba's is where I meet Jesus. This is where I find support for my faith." The thing that distinguishes the Christian enterprise from others is the radical notion that God is active in God's created world, that God has unleashed power in this realm – power for healing, for justice, for reconciliation, for restoration – and even more radically, that God has chosen to channel that power through the likes of us. Was that smart on God's part? The jury's out for some ... but when I look at the revelation of scripture, of Jesus, of the history of the church, I come to this: We cannot do it without God, and God will not do it without us.

We cannot heal the world, restore the lost, bring about justice and peace on our own strength. We cannot do it without God's power. And the mechanism by which we tap into that power and exercise it in the world is faith. If God is the brain, and we are the parts of the body that need to move God's agenda in this world, then faith is the fluid that carries the messages across synapses and circuits. You don't need faith to be an American, or a member of Rotary, or to live ethically. You do need faith to be an effective follower of Christ.

Continued

That's what Jesus' disciples were beginning to learn. I wondered what it was that prompted them to say, "Increase our faith!" In the passage just before this one, they're asking about forgiveness and reconciliation, and here's what Jesus said:

"If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

Yikes—I would ask for more faith too! Who can forgive again and again? The disciples were right to think that, if this is what Jesus is asking for, we need more faith. They were realizing just how radical this "Kingdom" life really is—giving your stuff away, giving up your comforts, forgiving the unforgivable, loving the unlovable, healing the incurable ... They were realizing that Jesus's project went much deeper than liberation from oppressors or reforming a corrupt religious system. Jesus was proclaiming a complete shift in how we see the world and interact with God and other people. God doesn't want us to layer church or morality or ethics on top of our way of being—God is inviting us into God's way of being.

"Increase our faith!" they cried. And Jesus was not gentle with them. "Increase your faith? If you had real faith the size of a mustard seed you could command this tree to uproot itself and be planted in the sea. Who are you to ask for more faith? Are you a servant who comes in from the fields and says, 'I'm tired. Let me rest... how about you make me dinner this time?' No, faith is your job, your whole entire job description. Don't you get that yet?"

So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless servants; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

Obviously, Jesus was having a moment, frustrated with them. But this does get at the sense of entitlement with which we often approach God. Who's the boss and who's the servant? Are we working with God or doing our own thing and asking God to bless it? What is our part in bringing about the reign of God on earth?

These were questions that began to nag at St. Francis of Assisi. Francis was born into a wealthy family in a time when church and government were corrupted by power and money. He had no desire to be religious—he wanted to be a knight, getting glory for the prized medieval qualities of chivalry, bravery, daring. An early battle led to a year's captivity in an enemy dungeon, and when he was finally ransomed he returned to Assisi to work for his father in their textile business. But he began to have religious experiences—to be drawn to lepers, whom he feared and loathed; and to have visions. In one of these, in a broken-down church in San Damiano, he heard a voice from behind the crucifix say to him, "Francis, go repair my house, which is falling in ruins." He came to understand that God meant the church "Big C," and he committed himself to reform, to radical simplicity, to preaching the Gospel with clarity. He attracted so many followers, they started an order, the Franciscans, and as we see in his namesake pope, his example continues to transform lives. Francis lived that balance between working for justice and trusting in God. It required him to completely leave behind his old ways of being and live by faith no money, no shoes, entirely relying on God and people's generosity.

To live by faith he had to change his operating system. Can we remember back in the deep mists of time, when Apple first introduced its computers – the operating system was completely new, more intuitive, different from the DOS standard. Some were afraid to try it; others made the switch and said they could never go back.

The Christian life is about changing operating systems. Making the switch to the "faith" operating system means leaving behind our own strategies for getting through life, our "I'll try harder" and "I am a good person," It means claiming our status as beloved of God who can get where we want to be only by God's power, not our own. We become willing to let God's power flow through us. We learn to open those channels, to clear away the clutter. Living by faith means becoming vulnerable, opening ourselves to God's life. It requires us to see by faith, not by sight.

I had a dream once, in which I was driving a car in a strange city. In this city, all the hospitality businesses—hotels, restaurants, bars—were in one sector, and we were looking for a particular hotel driveway. But there were no lights. Nothing. No car lights, no street lights, no lights in windows, nothing. Pitch black. And we're hurtling through this darkness, looking for this driveway, with no way to see it. It was nerve-wracking. And then someone in the back said, "Have you tried the infra-red lights?" And I flicked a switch on the dashboard, and boom! All the lights sprang out. Street lights, lights from cars, lights in windows. They'd all been there, but we couldn't see them without the infra-red lights.

Now this dream was vivid, and in the morning it seemed to me that it was a God dream—but I wasn't sure what it meant.

And then a few years later, I learned how infra-red works—I hadn't known it when I had the dream, at least not consciously. Infra-red vision works by heat—it sees heat, it sees where life is, and that shows up as light. Life is light. "In Him was life, and that life was the light of humankind." This dream was about seeing with the eyes of faith, with faith vision.

The Life of God, the power of God is here, my friends, already here, full, vibrant, but we need faith vision to perceive it. When we try to use these eyes, we can come away thinking God is not here. Suffering and pain persist. The ice caps are melting, animals dying, people killing each other. But God is here! In Christ, we have been given that vision. In baptism, God's operating system is installed in us—we need to make the switch and leave behind the old one. That one's hard-wired—we can't uninstall it. We have to keep choosing the new. And then we start to see the Life of God that is already here. We can participate with God in restoring all things to wholeness.

Why would God leave so much up to us, when God knows how feeble and fickle we can be? Is this a cosmic cruelty? It might be, had God not also provided what we need. God asks only that we take hold of it. And we can do that better together than we can alone.

It seems that faith is a contagious thing, and one which we can hold for one another. We can pass it down from one generation to another, and friend to friend. Paul wrote to Timothy, *"I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you."* Lois and Eunice and many a father and grandfather too have "held faith" for their children until such time as they took hold of it. Maybe you're holding it for someone you love. Who are your "grandmothers" and "fathers" in the faith, from whom you learned to trust and believe? And who are your friends in the faith, brothers and sisters who help you believe when your faith is weak? And for whom do you do that, by your prayers and your encouragement?

Faith is the gas in our engine, that keeps us moving God-ward. Our call is to keep these eyes wide open to the needs of the world and our faith vision tuned to the reality of God's Life breaking out around us.

God will not do it without us, and we cannot do it without God. Oh, but with the power of the Spirit at work in us and through us? Enough of us? Injustice can be dismantled. Damage to our planet can be healed. Food, housing, resources can be shared by all, our schools equal for all children. The most intractable enemies can become reconciled, and peace break out. That's why I am a Christian—because what God is up to through St. Columba's as we exercise our faith together, can move mountains and mulberry trees—and maybe even human hearts. Amen.