

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 10.2.16

Scripture: Lamentations 1:1-6, 3:19-26

Luke 17:5-10

I'm confused. I'm confused by Jesus' understanding of faith. I'm confused by his implying that faith can be quantified. I'm confused by his implying that faith is a power akin to useless trickery, enabling such silliness as the transplanting of a tree from its earthen home to sunken yet planted in the sea. I'm confused by his sharp-tongued following up with the disciples about their being as slaves who should just shut up and get about their business.

For starters, faith: I don't expect faith in God to enable powers that would overcome the physical laws of reality. I've never seen the power of faith manifest this way, that someone who lives by faith might be able to transplant a tree from earth to ocean by the power of that faith. I've certainly never myself experienced faith this way, though I feel myself to have been a person who lives by faith most of my life. Therefore, I don't expect that faith—mine or anyone else's—will unleash such bizarre power.

Poet Christian Wiman claims: "Faith is nothing more than a motion of the soul toward God. It is not belief. Belief has objects—Christ was resurrected; God created the earth—faith does not. Even the motion of faith is mysterious and inexplicable: I say the soul moves 'toward' God, but that is only the limitation of language. It may be God who moves, the soul that opens for him. Faith is faith in the soul. Faith is the word faith decaying into pure meaning."

I hold that, even having read it first a few years ago. I hold more closely this, for its being a little more specific, that faith is to live as if God were real—God who, in the words of David Bentley Hart, is "the truly transcendent source and end of all contingent reality," God who, further in Mr. Hart's words, "creates through 'donating' being to a natural order that is complete in itself" and God, now in my words, whose work of sustaining is on-going, the evidence of which is the on-going realness of the world, both as an objective fact but moreover as one whose existence the human mind can perceive, imagine, study, and come to know, to understand, to rely on, but also to reimagine as new evidence presents or things simply change.

Faith is to live as if God were real.

For what it's worth, Mr. Hart, in his book *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*, explains what he regards as "The most pervasive error one encounters in contemporary arguments about belief in God," this being "the habit of conceiving of God simply as some very large object or agency within the universe, or perhaps alongside the universe, a being among other beings, who differs from all other beings in magnitude, power, and duration, but not ontologically [that is, in the nature of being], and who is related to the world more or less as a craftsman is related to an artifact."

As it happens, this is a modern understanding of God, not a timeless one—it having dawned along with the Modern Age and giving rise to modern mechanical technologies (one really such technology being the clock, so now time would be imagined in terms of mechanics, and would become easily and precisely measured); this modern theological idea now energizing the rise of an industrialized economy, manufacturing and the factory assembly-line, and it reaching an apotheosis in the mechanization of death as exemplified in the world war of the 20th century, in the death camps of totalitarian regimes, and in the efficiency of the nuclear bomb.

Given this, it's an understanding of God that is running out of truth, that is in pressing need of reimagining. What's more, it leaves me, at least, as a post-modern person, with no sense that faith has anything to do with such power over nature as might transplant a tree from earth to ocean, from soil to sea. I have no experience, and therefore no understanding, of faith as Jesus promises it to be.

Really, Jesus' response to the disciples strikes me as confusing indeed, even absurd.

But so does their initial request—the request that spurred this silly response. "Increase out faith!" the disciples said. Faith, though, doesn't feel to me like something that comes in measurable amounts. Faith doesn't feel like something that comes in degrees of volume or density. Faith simply is—the word decayed into pure meaning. Like love, faith is a recognized reality in whose light and presence one lives, or is unrecognized, unfelt, denied, cast aside.

The boys will ask me, mostly in teasing play, "Who do you love more?" Of his brother, the one will ask, "Do you love me more, or him?" They ask mostly trusting what I have told them over and over again, and what I think they also know: that love isn't about degree or amount. The two boys are different; I love them the same. The way that love will be manifest is different, as their needs differ: I love them the same. And this is true of all love in my felt

experience: the way love plays out between me and Jess will be different from how love plays out here amidst this congregation, which will be different from how it plays out among casual friends or amidst society or in relation to the created order. Love manifests differently, in particular ways among particular parties called to particular tasks together: it is love all the same.

King Lear wondered as much but of his daughters, of which loved him the most. And this is what makes the play a tragedy, that Lear believed love to be such a thing as could be measured, weighed as if on a scale. The two older daughters, equally calculating as their father, each tried to convince him of her supreme love—so each, and not the others, might inherit the kingdom. The third daughter, confident in her true devotion to her father, simply said as an aside, “I can only love and be silent.” Unsatisfied, though, with this quiet, peaceful response, Lear disowned her, a misguided loyalty that would be the death of him.

Of God: we can love and be silent.

Of God: we can live by faith and be silent, neither defensive of what amount of faith we think ourselves to have been allotted, nor demanding that we might have *more* lest we fall behind what we think we need or we believe ourselves to deserve or suspect others to have.

Of God: we can simply live by faith in peace.

Indeed, anything other than this isn't faith. If it can be measured, it can be evaluated; and if it can be evaluated, it can be objectified; and if it can be objectified, it can become a source of envy and cause of conflict—whereas that which abides, and therefore abounds, which is to say faith and hope and love, can be neither quantified nor objectified nor cause of conflict. It simply is—and it is ours to receive and recognize, or to deprive ourselves of and deny.

Mind you, this is a minority report. What I'm giving you this morning, in response to this text, in response to this exchange between Jesus and his disciples: this is a minority report. Most commentaries I read in advance of this Sunday, and the sermon I listened to on this gospel lesson, focused on the request as if it were a rightful one: “Increase our faith.”

I'm alone in doubting that this is all that helpful a thing to pray.

According to those others—the majority, it seems—when you might have felt as if you needed more faith, when situations of all sorts might have any one of us suspecting that our faith is not up to the task set, we're right (these voices of authority assure us), right to pray:

“Increase our faith.” Indeed, in the sermon I heard, the preacher even prayed these words on the congregation’s behalf: “Increase our faith.” As a mantra, after each paragraph calling to mind some desperate situation in the world today (and there are many, of course), she followed up with this: “Increase our faith.”

But I don’t think this is the right thing to pray. I’m sorry, I just don’t. I don’t think this is the right thing for disciples to ask for — neither those first ones of long ago, nor us these days. I don’t think this is a rightful (or helpful) way to imagine faith, and I don’t think this is a rightful concern for us to bring to the task of discipleship — that we have “more” faith. And my hesitation in this regard isn’t simply because I can’t relate to the request (though I can’t, and because I don’t experience faith in so quantifiable a way); my hesitation in this regard is also, and moreover, because Jesus seems really quite pissed off by the request.

Not that he’s been in a great mood lately. These last several chapters of Luke have him increasingly impatient, increasingly petulant and sharp-tongued.

I couldn’t even approach him last week. No, last week I stayed with Paul in his writing to his apprentice, Timothy; and you just know that, if you’re choosing the company of Paul over that of Jesus, then Jesus is really not in a playful mood.

Just so this morning: here he really does deploy some pretty harsh rhetoric. Talk of slaves, talk of masters who have little patience for their slaves and who are clearly *not* going to invite the slaves to join them at dinner but are instead going to treat them as the slaves that they are: Jesus is not about to reward the disciples for simply doing what they’re supposed to do.

“Have faith. Be faithful. You’ve been called by faith. You’ve responded in faith. Now act on that faith. Just do it, for God’s sake.”

Just do what you’re supposed to do.

I mean, do you sing songs of praise to your children when they just, for once, put their dirty clothes in the hamper? Do you throw a party for your spouse when, your arms full of groceries, she gets the door for you? Do you organize a ticker-tape parade for your co-worker when he, on his way to the office coffee-maker, checks in to see if you want a cup, too?

Honestly, just do the thing that is yours to do and let’s get on with it.

Forget that actual slaves have no say in what is theirs to do. Forget that the master really doesn’t need to remind the slaves that they’re worthless, and to require them to admit as

much. Isn't it fine for just this moment that Jesus has reached the end of his rope? Doesn't it fall somewhat to the disciples to recognize that they've been keeping company with the Messiah, empowered by him, encouraged by him, inspired by him, befriended by him; and that they should maybe rest content with that for now before requesting still more: "Increase our faith!" I mean, when is enough, enough? "You have faith! It's a gift, an absolute gift! Now live by it and quit demanding more!"

It bears saying that the crucifixion is soon upon him. It bears saying that we're mere weeks, maybe days, away from entering Jerusalem whereupon Jesus, he knew, would come to his end—dreadful, painful, shameful. It had been a long journey. It had been a rich and good ministry. Much had been taught. Much had been learned. People had been healed, restored. And the disciples had been right along side him the whole time—empowered to do the work of the gospel amidst a world in desperate need. They'd seen the whole glorious thing that we're still talking about to this day; they'd seen it first-hand, up close. They'd been right there all along. And soon Jesus would go on ahead, now all alone—to the cross, enduring passion unlike most people would ever know, and into death.

And now this: "Increase our faith."

We have what we need. To do the work laid before us, we have what we need. To enact the gospel of God's love for the whole world, we have what we need. To resist the many evils of our day and age, we have what we need.

To stand in resistance to racism and to recognize white privilege, we have what faith we need. To stand for justice and healthy communities, empowering both a trusted and trustworthy police force and a citizenry every member of which is considered equal under the law, we have what faith we need.

To stand in resistance to hatred and demagoguery while also lamenting where once great cities and once prosperous towns now sit lonely, desolate, or in dreadful disrepair, we have what faith we need. To hold our leaders to the high standard of hopeful envisioning, capable governing, and bold rebuilding, we have what faith we need.

To stand in resistance to the exploitation of peoples and environments in the interest of profit making, we have what faith we need. To stop forgetting what values are true and enduring, are human and life-giving, we have what faith we need.

What we've been given will suffice for us: God who sustains all creation, even us; Christ who emptied himself, and for our sake; the Spirit that continues to speak, even here and now; and the Church that nourishes our souls in sacrament and truth. This will suffice for us.

I was confused. I really was. I'm not anymore. I'm as certain as I can be that I know what I need to know.

I hope the same is true for you.

Thanks be to God.