

October 6, 2019

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

“INCREASE OUR FAITH”

Luke 17: 5-10

“The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’”

You may be familiar with the practice of Muslims collectively turning east toward Mecca during prayer time. But you would not be correct if you ascribed it to any adoration of their prophet Mohammed. No, it is a symbolic turning of their lives towards God, a remembering which involves a daily reorientation of their lives in the direction of the holy, and specifically to that place, at least, where God was particularly revealed in the giving of the Quran.

This morning, on World Communion Sunday, we join with Christians all over the world in turning toward the center of our faith for hope, not toward a place, but a *person*. As we gather around the Table we reorient our lives with millions of brothers and sisters around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The scope of our concern this morning extends beyond the personal to encompass the globe. The focus of our concern is God’s dream of peace for humanity and healing for the earth. Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God’s peace and healing - for you and for all.

The good news is that we are not without resources for participating in making the dreams of God come true. The disciples ask Jesus to “**increase**” their faith. Jesus’ response suggests that it is not at all helpful trying to quantify faith. We’ve at times found ourselves admiring others who seem to have more faith than we do. If only we had as much faith as they we may tell ourselves. We may be left feeling down on ourselves for not making it as a “real” Christian. Or it may be we’re brashly proud of ourselves, and disdainful of others, because we think ourselves having much faith compared to others. A third possibility is that our “we of little faith” attitude serves to more easily absolve ourselves, justify our mood, our passivity, to resign ourselves to the current state of affairs in our life, or in the world, which we suppose we cannot possibly affect because of the weak state of our faith.

Jesus isn’t buying it. “**If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could tell this mulberry tree to uproot and plant itself in the ocean, and it would obey you**” (Lk. 17:6). The problem, Jesus assures them, is not with the size of their faith, but their lack of courage or effort in trying it out. Faith is best understood as a verb, not a noun. It is our God-given capacity to imagine and enact a future which you might not think possible based on the present realities. Faith is the trust that there is the power of God available to us to make a difference. Faith gains its power from being aligned with God’s dream of peace, of reconciliation, of healing. And all that’s needed to activate this power is the courage to commit to a dream, God’s dream.

We’ve heard all this before, but we don’t *TRUST* it, that is, our faith being utilized to transform our communities. But we could. I think it was John F. Kennedy who once said that the “**future is not a gift, it is an achievement.**” Christians achieve God’s providential future by

utilizing even the tiniest bit of faith to command whatever is in the way of this future to uproot itself.

Example: a few years ago, when Toya and I were in San Francisco, we stayed just 2 blocks from Glide Memorial Methodist Church in the downtown. In 1929, a Methodist philanthropist, Lizzie Glide, purchased a piece of land at the intersection of Ellis and Taylor Streets in San Francisco. Two years later, a church building was complete. By 1963, only some 30 years later, San Francisco was changing even faster than this country changed in the '60's - but that congregation's only changes were its drift apart from its community. Glide Memorial was considered an irrelevant and dying congregation at only 35 years of age. Until Cecil Williams was appointed to go there. He led the church out into that tumultuous San Francisco community of the '60's and '70's. He challenged the congregation to a celebration of life and loving and self-giving. "You have to be *Christ* to our community," he told them. What happened was a change for embracing a community of people perhaps only Jesus could love unconditionally - the ragged, the hungry, the angry, the fearful, the mentally impaired, the sick. They embraced the marginalized, hippies, addicts, gays, lesbians, immigrants, refugees; all those who knew more of crucifixion than resurrection.

Cecil Williams went with a loudspeaker to the slum tenements of that city and called the cocaine addicts to come down from their hovels. He called them to rejoin the civic community. They came, in droves. This church now has dozens of ministries focusing on those who need recovery and unconditional love. They had a dream that no one in San Francisco would ever have to go to bed hungry and they followed through on that dream by serving nearly 1 million meals a year. This congregation said to those living on the streets: you come to us and we'll rehabilitate you, we'll house you, we'll retrain you for work, and we'll provide a way for you to get to work. In short, we'll love you. Then when you've rejoined our civic community, we'll give you a leadership position helping still others get off the street. And Glide Memorial Methodist Church is still at it with those leaders - with a vision, enthusiasm and hope. They trust in what God can do.

We might be telling ourselves, 'Yeah, but Cecil Williams must have a whole lot more faith than I do.' I'd say he had about a mustard seed's worth. What he had was a deep compassion, born of lament for a city losing its children to drugs and poverty. And, yes, he had just enough faith to pick up a loudspeaker and invite his lost and lonely friends over for a meal at the church. He had just enough faith to command the cynicism and hopelessness in his guests and in the bureaucracies of the city to be uprooted.

Now, I know that this congregation has similar aims and hopes. But it can grow tiring, you can face discouragement; it can even form divisions among you. Just for this, you and I are called to this Table of communion, with all Christians around this globe - and all around this particular congregation in all your own diversity. Here Christ is calling us out from the tenements of our own fear and timidity, infusing us with His strength and courage like a second blood-stream coursing through us.

We are called to enact our faith, in our personal lives and in our civic lives, that we might, in the name of Jesus Christ, say to the frightened, the grieving, the despairing of these

very troubling days, that it is recovery time, healing time, a time to love one another unconditionally. For that is what we remember and reenact at this Table now - what Christ is always doing for us and for our salvation.