

**St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church**  
Keller, Texas  
Sermon for October 6, 2019 ~ Proper 22C  
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

*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. - Luke 17:5-6*

The request of the apostles was probably prompted by having heard words of warning from Jesus about their responsibilities in supporting the weaker members of the community and forgiving repeatedly the repentant sister or brother. So, their request is, in effect, "make us adequate for discipleship." And, since they operate from the perspective of *scarcity*, they don't think they have enough faith to accomplish what Jesus is calling them to do.

And Jesus responds by using some dramatic language to speak to them about the relationship between trust and obedience. It was the eastern custom to use language in the most vivid way possible. So, when Jesus speaks of faith in this way, he intentionally uses an absurd illustration to emphasize the power of faith when it is exercised. He means to affirm the faith his followers *have*, not criticize them for a lack of it, and to invite them to act and live by this faith. From the perspective of *scarcity*, they don't think they have enough. From Jesus' perspective of *abundance*, he assures them that they have enough, just the right amount, to fulfill their calling.

A dear friend of mine named John often used a similarly absurd and dramatic expression when someone spoke to him of not having enough spiritual resources. He would say, faith "is like anchovies and harp music; a little bit goes a long way." Think about it.

Faith is so concentrated that it goes a very long way. Jesus often confronted the scarcity mentality of his followers with parables and illustrations of the concentrated power of faith: a little bit of light scatters the darkness, a little bit of salt brings out the flavor in food, a little bit of leaven causes the loaf to rise, a little bit of mercy brings healing, a little bit of forgiveness liberates a heavy heart, a little bit of love affirms life and strengthens relationships. After yesterday's Pride Parade, one of my colleagues had a tee shirt that said, "Free Priest Hugs." A young woman asked her for a hug and when she hugged her, the young woman melted into tears. Something as little as a hug from the Church touched something deep within her soul. A little bit of our treasure, offered to God, not only supplies the resources for the mission of the Church, it reminds us that all we have, spent, saved, or given away is a sacred trust from God, and sets us free from slavery to our possessions – even 1%!

The apostles' request an increase in faith and Jesus says that even the small amount we have is effective and powerful beyond our present realization. The possibilities opened up by faith cancel out words such as "impossible" and "absurd" because faith puts us in touch with the power of God.

People sometimes speak to me about how little or how weak their faith is. I often feel the same way. So, it is clear that the problem of those first followers of Jesus is still with us. So, Jesus' words for his apostles are good news for us.

Don't be concerned so much with what you *don't* have. Instead, use the little bit you do have and you'll be amazed by the results.

I am reminded of an event in our family years ago when our first son was about four years old. Gay and I were engaged in a conversation at the dinner table and our son asked me to pass him the sugar. Without even looking at him, I pushed sugar bowl in his direction. A few seconds later, I looked at him as he was about to pour a spoonful of sugar into his glass of iced tea, which had about half an inch of sugar sitting at the bottom. As I guided his hand and the spoon back to the sugar bowl, I said, "Stir what you have." He did that and discovered that it was more than sweet enough to satisfy his sweet tooth.

Most of us already have more faith than we use. We just need to stir it up! That's where obedience comes in. Faith, trust in God, is never an abstract concept. It must be expressed in tangible ways in the living of our lives. Faith is obediently taking action on what we say we believe. Jesus uses a parable about the relationship between a master and his slave to illustrate.

*Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing 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!" – Luke 17:7-10*

The point is simply this: when we are working for God, we already have our wages, our retirement program, and all our fringe benefits. All that remains is for us to simply do what we have been commanded to do, steadfastly, obediently, and faithfully. God's grace is in constant supply and that grace is sufficient for every need.

St. Paul reminded Timothy of the importance of his faith in living the life of grace. "For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (II Timothy 1:6-7). The grace that God has already provided is activated when we exercise our faith, even if we feel that we don't have enough. A little bit goes a very long way when we stir it up in obedience to Jesus.

Okay, I understand that the spirit of independence in us prompts a negative reaction to the words "obedience" and "commandment." So, here's another way to approach the matter. Most of us have computers. Our computers have operating systems. Those operating systems function in response to our commands. When our commands are incorrect or the operating system fails to recognize our commands, the computer can't accomplish its purpose.

God's grace is the operating system for the life of a follower of Jesus. God has provided the system of commands that are necessary. We sometimes call them the *means of grace*. When we trust those commands, we discover God's power at work in us, making it possible for us to accomplish our true purpose in life.