

Proper 22 C 2016

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Psalm 137:1-6

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

Does faith have a size?

Certainly we think it comes in sizes;
We speak of it as great,
Or little,
Of it growing.
And we speak of it as a thing we can lose.

We who are counters,
Adders and subtracters
Cannot help but assume that faith
Is something that can be measured –
And to leap from there to the assumption
That the bigger it is,
The better it is.
From there,
It's an easy leap, for many,
Into feeling guilty
About having a faith
That doesn't measure up.

Certainly the disciples
Were just like us in this.
They thought that faith
Came in sizes,
And they wanted more, bigger, better.

But Jesus, who is just like us,
Is one of us –
Is not like us in this.
Jesus does not answer the plea of the disciples,
That he help them find more of what they know they need.
Without more faith,
How can they be faithful
To the awesome and wonderful way he leads them,
A way that turns the world upside down
and inside out?

Increase our faith!

Their plea is earnest,
Demanding.
When we want to be different from them,
We see it, perhaps,
As dumb and inappropriate.
When we see ourselves,
Not too comfortably,
In their company,
We feel their feelings
And want what they want.
More of what we think will make up the difference –
Make it easy or possible
To follow in the way –
The way of listening, letting go,
Reconciling, healing, renewing.
How can we do that,
Without more faith?
Increase our faith,
We plead,
As the disciples plead.

And then we remember
That Jesus seldom, if ever,
Answers their questions
The way we would want.

When people come to us,
Asking how to increase their faith,
We, rightly and appropriately,
Give questions and answers that offer help and guidance.
What are the spiritual practices
That increase compassion?
Who are the companions
Who will support us and hold us accountable?
Where is the community
That will comfort and inspire us?

These are good questions, good answers,
Right and true.
They are our answers,
And they satisfy.
They are enough
Because they make a difference,
And, even more important,
They keep us in the realm
Where we belong –

The world of counting,
Measuring,
Keeping time.
A world where even faith can be measured,
And increased.

For Jesus,
Faith is not a thing
That can be counted and measured.
It does not have a size.
It is not a thing.

He tries to tell them that,
And we still can't hear him.
Faith does not have a size.
If it did,
The tiniest amount
Would make giant trees
Fly through the air
And take root in the sea.

We're supposed to have our minds blown here,
And then either laugh,
Or cry,
Or stand in silent wonder
For a moment that can't be measured in time.
Jesus, the master storyteller,
Is trying to blow holes in our careful constructions.
What we usually do instead
Is to take him literally,
And then feel guilty
That no trees are flying into the sea.
No mountains are moving.
There must be something wrong with our faith.

No mulberry trees are flying.

I saw a mulberry tree this summer in the Holy Land,
And it wasn't going anywhere.
It was huge;
Its branches shaded an entire park,
And its roots gnarled around above ground
And reached way under ground in every direction.
There was no way
It was ever moving from the place it had stood for centuries.
This mulberry tree in Jericho

Was not being uprooted and planted in the sea.

But was it a mulberry tree?
It might have been
The kind of tree Jesus was talking about,
But we call different trees by the same names,
And the same trees by different names,
And they also called this a sycamore
But it bears no resemblance to a sycamore here.

I touched it,
And I saw its fruits,
And I marveled.
I thought,
As I was bidden,
Not of this difficult saying of Jesus
But of the agreeable story the gospel writer tells afterwards,
Of Zacchaeus in the tree,
Called down out of a life of isolation
Into a world of inclusion and hope.
That was the tree I saw.

And none of this really matters.
Jesus is not asking us to think about what kind of tree,
Any more than he is asking us to measure faith.
Any more than he is asking us
To wallow in shame about the size of our faith
Or guilt about our inability to increase it.

Here, I believe,
Is what he is doing.
Jesus is inviting us to walk straight out of our world
Of counting and measuring
And into a world of vision.
A world where limits disappear
And promises are fulfilled.

There are no numbers God's economy.
There is only abundance.
Everyone gets the same generous wages
No matter how long they work.
We question it every time,
And say it's not fair,
And every time,
God comes back with more.
God is beyond measure

And the mercy of God is measureless.

If there are no numbers in God's economy,
Then can faith have a size?

Jesus seems to say no.
There is only faith.

We live in the world of counting,
Of adding and subtracting,
So to us
There is a big difference between the size of a mustard seed,
A speck,
And the girth of a tree
Or the vastness of the sea.
But faith,
A measureless gift,
Tips us into a whole new world,
The world of promise,
Of hope,
Of vision.

Keeping the vision,
Keeping hope alive
Is the work
Of the people of faith.

Sometimes it looks as crazy
As a gigantic tree
Flying through the air
And planting itself in the sea.

But the vision is true.
There is enough.
There is more than enough for everyone,
And still plenty to spare.

Jerusalem the golden
Still lives,
A bright and shining vision
Gleaming through the bitter divisions.
America the beautiful
Is still a land of promise,
Shining through vicious injustice,
The anger and the fear.
Shining even through our shame and guilt

As we come to terms with what we have done
And our terror
At a possible dark future.

This, then,
Is a moment when we can choose
To be people of faith.

People of faith are vision keepers.
They do not forget Jerusalem
While they sit in exile.
They do not forget hope
When the future seems dark.

They see beyond the counting and measuring
That mark our lives
And believe in a good future.

Like the prophet Habakkuk,
Who saw his beloved country
Falling into ruin,
People of faith
Believe in God's future.

If that future seem slow,
Says the prophet,
Wait for it.
It will surely come.

It is not for us
To measure our faith.
That only leads to guilt and silence
And inaction.

Jesus invites us
To stop counting,
To stop measuring,
And to step out.
Trust the vision.
Write it in big letters,
So that a runner could read it.

Believe in God's vision.
A world renewed.