

DON'T DREAM; ACT!

Sermon, October 2, 2016

Texts: Luke 17:1-10; II Timothy 1:1-14

As our music director quipped on Friday, *"I hope no one reads a political statement into that hymn."* (The hymn we just sang has this line in the third stanza: "... when the last dread TRUMP shall wake us, do not Thou, O God, forsake us ..."). And let me add an additional caveat: The sermon title is not a political statement, either ... it's just a bit of a pun taken from the title of that controversial federal legislative proposal.¹ I've always liked the story about the sales manager of a large real estate firm who was interviewing an applicant for a sales job. "Why have you chosen this career?" the manager asked. The young man replied, "I've always dreamed of making a million dollars in real estate, just like my father!" The impressed sales manager responded, "Your father made a million dollars in real estate?" "No," replied the young man. "but he always dreamed of doing so." You know, the Bible doesn't talk much about the dreams of the apostles, but the Bible does devote an entire book to the Acts of the apostles! These were the same apostles who, in today's reading, pleaded with Jesus, "Lord, increase our faith!" Well, they went on to learn both from Jesus and by their practical experience that the trick to increasing faith is to put the faith they already had to work; like a muscle, faith has to be exercised in order for it to grow! They did that, they put their faith to work ... and they went on to turn their world upside down. And that's pretty much my sermon today ... the way to increase our faith is to put the faith we already have into action!

In the lectionary Gospel reading from Luke, the apostles requested, "Lord, increase our faith!" Now, we can all sympathize with the apostles' request, as Jesus has been teaching them some rather hard things about sin and faith and forgiveness. Things like, "Woe to that person who causes someone to sin, especially little ones! It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin, so watch yourselves!" Yikes! A millstone around the neck was sort of the first century equivalent of cement shoes; you don't want to be thrown into the water wearing those! That should scare the socks off of those of us who are parents or teachers or grandparents or aunts and uncles or anyone who has contact with children (or pastors who give children's sermons). Now yes, I do know there is grace and forgiveness offered when we acknowledge our guilt and regret our sinful examples that have caused others, especially younger others, to sin. But that doesn't lessen the seriousness of this statement by Jesus; causing others to sin is a serious matter. And one of the blessings and burdens of adulthood is that little ones imitate us far more than we can ever fully realize! Even apart from the threat of a millstone, we have the sinking dead weight of guilt in our conscience when we realize how we have caused hurt and difficulty for others, especially those we love. Now, we all communicate "Do as I say, not as I do" to our children in one way or another, and sometimes, that's not such a bad thing. We hope our children won't make the same mistakes we made in life, and we want them to do better than we did, so it makes sense that we want them to do some things differently. And we want to set good examples of integrity and honesty and thrift and faithfulness, but the reality is that more often than not, they imitate us, good habits AND bad ... as I was reminded two weeks ago when Hannah texted me she got her first speeding ticket. Ugh ... I feel the millstone!

And then on the heels of that ominous warning, Jesus lays this on the disciples: "If a person sins against you, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him. Even if he just turns around and does it again, and apologizes again, forgive him! Even if he does that seven times in one day, forgive him!" If the disciples are anything like us, I'm sure they are all thinking, "How in the world do I do that, Jesus? That sort of thing just gets me angry! And if that person just keeps doing it, again and again and again and again and again and again and just keeps saying, 'I'm sorry,' well ... how can I be that forgiving? I'll probably just want to punch his lights out!"

I came across an interesting word study this week. There are four words that stem from one Anglo-Saxon root word ... those words are *wrath*, *wreath*, *writhe* and *wraith*. *Wrath* is an old word for anger, but that's not all it means ... it also carries a connotation of being twisted and distorted and red in the face with anger! A *wreath* is a set of branches twisted in upon themselves in a circle. To *writhe* is to twist in pain and agony. *Wraith* is an old word for ghost, but it's a particular kind of ghost ... a wraith is a ghost that is doomed to a tortured existence, restless for eternity, and is a particularly wrathful spirit (some of you remember the Ringwraiths in *Lord of the Rings* ... haunting, dark, tortured spirits riding about). *Wrath*, *wreath*, *writhe*, *wraith* ... all carry the connotation of something twisted, something contorted, bent out of its proper original shape, something less than what it was created to be.² If we hold onto anger, it can have a twisting, distorting, lessening effect on us ... so it is good to let anger go, it is good to forgive, if for no other reason than it benefits us. But that's so often easier said than done, especially when it comes to repeat offenders! So the disciples are thinking, "How can we be more forgiving, Jesus?" Lord, increase our faith!

We are told Jesus then responds to the disciples' request by saying. "If you had faith as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." And then, Jesus launches into a

¹ The *DREAM Act* (acronym for Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) was a federal legislative proposal for a multi-phase process for undocumented immigrants in the United States that would first grant conditional residency and upon meeting further qualifications, permanent residency

² <http://lingwe.blogspot.com/2007/06/writhe-wroth-writen-wraith-and-ring.html>

discourse on the importance of being an obedient and dutiful servant, a discourse that appears to be rather random and disjointed from the subject at hand. However, I don't believe these discourses are as disjointed as they may appear. Perhaps Jesus is saying to His disciples that the problem is not their lack of faith; according to Jesus, just a bit of faith is all that is really needed to work wonders. The problem might just be their lack of action! If they were just dutifully doing what they ought to be doing, consistently serving as they ought to be serving, then they just might see the increased faith results they are seeking. If they would put their faith into action, in matters large and small, wonders would transpire! To slightly misuse Jesus' metaphor, if they would stop going around and around the "mulberry bush" that's right in front of them and deal with it directly in faith, amazing things might result!

I have a little poster in my office washroom which has a picture of a huge Alpine mountain range with the following caption: *"God sometimes moves mountains one pebble at a time."* This little poster encourages and inspires me to be faithful in "moving pebbles" ... to try to be faithful in all things, no matter how small and/or apparently insignificant. I believe Jesus is implying in so many words it is unproductive at best and deadly at worst to sit around twiddling our thumbs asking God to give us more faith so we can do the things *we really should be doing anyway*, right now in the day and hour we have, with the faith we already got. What we need to do is to start with what we have, doing what we know we ought to do even in the smallest duties, and *then*, Jesus implies, watch your faith grow and watch the mountains move! Faith is a muscle that grows when exercised. Left unused, it just atrophies.

I've mentioned these words of wisdom from that great twentieth century theologian ... Ann Landers... five or six times over the past twenty years I've been here, but I really do like it. She ran a little parable in her column entitled "YOU CAN BANK ON IT." *"Imagine you had a bank that each morning credited your account with \$1,440 -- with one condition: whatever portion of the \$1,440 you failed to use during the day would be erased from your account, and no balance would be carried over. What would you do? You know what you would do; you'd draw out every cent every day and use it to your best advantage! Well, you do have such a bank, and its name is TIME. Every morning, this bank credits you with 1,440 minutes. And it writes off as forever lost whatever portion you have failed to invest."* Well, God grants us each day 1,440 minutes from His Bank of Time, giving us opportunity with the time He has given us to put our faith to work, making investments with that time that can reap eternal benefits. Use your time well, put your faith to work in the day you have! It doesn't sound very religious, but I like the way one person put it, *"Have a blast while you last!"* Make the most of the time you have; use your time well while you have health, strength and ability to do so. Besides, we just don't know how much time we may have left.

In a rather oversimplified nutshell, I think that's Paul's word for a discouraged and dispirited Timothy. His young protégé is discouraged and at the point of tears, and Paul writes, among other things: *"Fan into flame the gift of God that is within you!"* The best way to cure despondency, Timothy, is put to use the faith God has already given you. Fan the flame you already have! To be clear, as Paul reiterates, the Bible tells us faith is a gift from God, a gift I believe each and every one of us here has been given or we wouldn't be here this morning! There is at least a spark of faith in your soul that has generated spiritual interest, a spark that yearns to be fanned into a flame, a spark that has drawn you to be in a house of worship this morning. That spark of faith is a gift from God! By God's grace we are given a faith, a faith we need to put to good use. Use it, fan that spark, make the most of the time and opportunity we have while we have time and opportunity and watch the miraculous happen. The central problem in our lives is not our lack of faith, but that we do not put the faith we DO have into action while we have the time and energy to do so! Have a blast while you last! Use what you already got! Do what God calls you to do. And it is the nature of faith to expand and increase and grow as we exercise it and put it to work!

Yes, we can sympathize with the disciples in their request for more faith. We, too, always tend to think we need more faith to do what we ought to be doing. We say to ourselves, *"Oh, if I just had more faith I would be a better Christian, I would be a better parent, a better spouse, a better worker, a better (fill in the blank)."* But the problem may not be our lack of faith. The problem may be our lack of action! As we take *affirmative* action, as talked about last week,³ as we exercise our faith, as we give hands and feet to our convictions, we will see good things, even miracles, happen! It really doesn't take a lot of faith to get things done, it really doesn't take a lot of faith to set things right, it really doesn't take a lot of faith to make things better ... what really matters is that we put the faith we already have to work. NOW. Do what you know to be right and good and proper and loving and honorable, and do it now; 99.9% of us already have what it takes within us by the grace of God to do what we know is right, right now! Don't say, "Someday." Don't say, "I'll get to it." Don't say, "When I'm feeling better or when I have more money (*and by the way, especially as we age, we're never going to feel totally better and we will never have enough money!*) or when I have a better job or when it stops raining, then I'll do the right thing." No, **JUST DO IT**, as the old Nike commercials would tell us ... the sooner, the better!

"Increase our faith," the disciples begged. Jesus replied, *"Increase your service."* Increase your service and you will find faith you never knew you had! Be God's person where you are, when you are, how you are, in the midst of how it is, and you will find faith not only sufficient for the task, but you will actually find your faith increasing ... not to mention you will also go on to find tremendous fulfillment as well as be a blessing to others around you.

³ See <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/jeremiahs-affirmative-action.pdf>