

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 2, 2016 (Proper 22, Year C)

“Supersize our faith!” That’s basically what Jesus’ closest disciples are asking him to do this morning. And in a world where bigger is better and might makes right and to the victor goes the spoils and the one who dies with the most toys wins, *more* faith is surely better than *less* faith. More always trumps less. Which is why we love all-you-can eat buffets and McMansions and ordering the Big Gulp at 7-11.

“Increase our faith,” they plead. And who *wouldn’t* want more of a good thing? More abundant blessings, more amazing grace, more fruits of the spirit, more abiding faith.

If more is always better why should it be any different when it comes to faith? More faith must equal more blessing and more peace and more spiritual clarity and more holier than thou moments. That’s how it works, right? Well, not exactly. At least according to Jesus.

He points out that for one thing, faith isn’t a zero sum game. Faith isn’t a limited commodity that the wise disciple hoards like food before a famine. More faith for *me* doesn’t mean less faith for *you*. There aren’t winners and losers when it comes to faith. The Christian life is not a spiritual version of *The Hunger Games* or *Survivor*.

And for another thing, time and time again, Jesus reminds us that the Christian life runs counter to the mainstream. What may be seen as victory in the eyes of the world, often isn’t in the eyes of God. And what may be seen as failure in the eyes of the world, often isn’t in the eyes of God. You need look no further than the cross for the ultimate example of the human perspective versus the divine outlook; as Easter people, we see in the hard wood of the cross an implement of death transformed into an instrument of life.

This isn’t to say that the notion of abundance isn’t a powerful *image* of faith. Sometimes more *is* better. For instance we can’t fully grasp God’s never-ending, ever-flowing, unconditional love for us. It’s like trying to comprehend the infinite nature of the cosmos — a concept the human mind can’t ever completely understand. God’s love is over-the-top and unending and more than we could possibly ever ask for or imagine or deserve. God’s love is not in limited supply or available for a limited time only. God’s capacity to love is a metaphor of more.

And the same idea of abundance encompasses the realm of prayer. It blows the mind to think that God is in relationship with and responsive to every single person in the entire world at the same time. That is some serious multitasking. I mean, I get distracted if I try to check my email while I’m on a conference call — not that I ever do that if I’m on a conference call with any of *you*. But you can think of God’s capacity for relationship as a kind of miraculous unlimited bandwidth. The more users, the better the service, not worse.

One of the abiding Scriptural images of God’s kingdom is the heavenly banquet. A feast where all our needs are met and satisfied in stunning fashion. But I envision this more as a table to which everyone is invited, not a table where the select few gorge themselves into a food coma while the rest gather up the crumbs that fall from the table. More means more for all. And we see that faith itself, the very notion of belief in God, is based upon a model not of scarcity but abundance.

So how much faith do you actually need? Not that you can really quantify it, but Jesus tells us that a little goes a long way. That we already have all that we need. That the faith of the tiny mustard seed, an ancient metaphor for smallness, is enough. And isn't that good news? It means that we can stop the commodification of faith, we can stop the pursuit of "more" faith and work with what we have. And, despite our faith insecurities — 'I'm terrible at praying, I'm not faithful enough' — and despite our faith guilt — 'I really need to get to church more often, I never make time to pray' — we have all the faith we need. That was conveyed to us through the water of baptism, the water of indelible relationship with Jesus Christ. It's a matter of tapping into it and nurturing it and allowing it to flourish, something we all seek to do through our involvement in and with the community of St. John's.

So how does faith manifest itself if it's not about quantity? Faith is realized primarily when you reach out to Jesus. The simple act of reaching toward the divine, even if you don't know why you're doing so or you're not sure of the "right way" to do so, is an act of faith. When you reach beyond yourself, when you recognize you can't do everything on your own (and you most certainly cannot), you are being faithful. Being here this morning is an act of faith whether you came here willingly and joyfully and intentionally or whether you're here grudgingly and under duress. It doesn't matter because you're here. And that only takes a small amount of faith.

The thing is, faith is most often realized in small, everyday acts. I think this is where we get hung up and start feeling unworthy. We hear about "faith that moves mountains" and we get frustrated when our faith can't even seem to move to the next room. Or we hear that old hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness" and we think, that's nice, but my faithfulness feels not so much "great" as rather mediocre. And I'm convinced, this is why Jesus brings us back to the mustard seed; to remind us that faith is so often found not in the large things, but in the small ones.

Let's be honest; sometimes the demands of the Christian life can feel overwhelming, like an impossible ideal. Love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemies, turn the other cheek, be merciful, give away your possessions, feed the poor, etc, etc. Living up to such lofty ideals of faith can feel like an impossible proposition. It's not easy stuff and we all stumble on a daily basis.

And maybe this is what the disciples were experiencing. Maybe their words weren't so much asking Jesus to supersize their faith as much as they were a simple plea to help them with it.

Maybe they needed some bucking up in the face of feeling unworthy in their faith. That even after leaving family and friends to follow him, the demands were just too much for ordinary people. And sometimes we need the same reassurances.

I do think we overcomplicate things sometimes; we forget the lesson of the tiny mustard seed. Remember, when it all seems so hard and complicated, Jesus distills everything down to the basics: love God, love neighbor. That's it. So you can think of the small ways in which you do just that and you start to see ways in which you are already exercising your faith in remarkable, if small, ways.

You only need a little bit of faith. And the good news is that you already have all the faith you will ever need.