I’ve mentioned to you several times that before seminary, I was a Youth Advisor for about 20 years at our church in New Jersey. We met on Tuesday nights, starting with dinner in the fellowship hall, then we’d go upstairs for a quick game of floor hockey (or not such a quick game, depending on the night), and then into the youth room for the program. One of the things I like most about youth ministry is the short “in-between” conversations you get with young people, just walking down the hall, waiting in the parking lot for a ride to show up, hanging out when they arrive early, or with a captive audience sitting on a crowded train to New York. That’s when you really get to know them… that’s when you have a chance to prove you can be trusted… +++ I guess it shouldn’t be too surprising but, after doing this for years, I think I started to believe I was ready for just about anything a young person might throw at me. +++| But that was before the night Jake appeared… ||| +++ Now, we were a fairly large church right in the middle of town and only a few blocks from the high school. So, it was pretty well-known that our youth group met on Tuesdays for dinner and so, sometimes, kids I didn’t know would just show up… One night, I happened to be eating at a table by myself when a teenager I didn’t know came in off the street. The first thing I noticed was he was wearing rollerblades in our building – then I noticed he looked exhausted – his long hair was a bit wild – and he looked kind of, well, scared. +++ This young man stood in the doorway and slowly looked all around the room, like he was looking for someone. He looked at our youth, whom he must have known from school, then he looked at the food table,… then he skated across the fellowship hall… straight to my table. He sat down in the chair beside me, and introduced himself: “Jake.” He said he wanted to ask me a question: “OK,” I said, “shoot.” +++ “I want to know if God will ever forgive me.”… I swallowed hard, and Jake continued:: “I’m only 17 years old but I’ve done a lot of bad stuff (…some of which he described to me in graphic detail). I’m afraid I’ve already blown it with God. I want a clean start – like a do-over – but I don’t know if God can ever forgive that stuff… I don’t even know if I should pray because… what if God is mad at me? … So,… I’m asking you:: Will God ever forgive me?” +++ +++ Like I said, I had thought I was ready for just about anything… now, suddenly, I felt like I knew nothing… Jake didn’t just want me to listen to him – or to understand. He wanted an answer and he fully expected me to provide it for him! Right now! +++ +++ And, in that moment, I clearly remember thinking… “God, you are asking more from me than I’m ready for. Give me the words I need… GIVE ME MORE FAITH…” +++ ||| +++ It went OK, I think… In my panic I blurted out something about Christ’s unconditional love and grace; about how he had done exactly what Jesus had said to do – he came into this church, confessed, repented, and asked for God’s forgiveness. I also said something about how God’s forgiveness is so much bigger than anything Jake could ever do; and how God always listens to prayer… (“Where did all that come from?” I wondered. I didn’t know that words like that were even in me.) +++ Jake thanked me. He said he felt better. Then he skated back across the fellowship hall, to the door, and I never saw him again.

This week, as I’ve worked my way through today’s challenging scripture passages, that night from over a decade ago has been coming back to me:: +++ I could once again see myself and Jake – sitting there… looking at each other – both feeling like we somehow weren’t enough… That we weren’t what God had wanted us to be. Things had been comfortable for us both – then,… suddenly,… they weren’t. +++ Jake was scared… I don’t know just what had happened – what caused this change in him – but now he was scared that he’d ruined his life – ruined his chance at forgiveness – at the age of 17. He was unsure of how to move forward – how to live his life. +++ I was already a Christ-follower but was suddenly convinced I didn’t know how to follow Christ – didn’t have what it took. Convinced that I needed to be more – to be better. +++ +++ How does all that relate to today’s readings? Well, let’s start with the Psalm… Like Jake, before they were carried away into exile, God’s People seemed to have it all. Not a care in the world – doing just what they wanted to do, when they wanted to do it. That was the problem… +++ The land they lived on had been God’s gift to them generations ago, and they were deeply connected to it – connected to Jerusalem – to their Temple – to Zion. They relished Zion – it was their joy – it was their identity – and it energized their music. But then, suddenly, because of their own sins, it had ended. Their city and temple were destroyed – and they had been


McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, October 6, 2019.
As for me – my reaction was the same as the apostles’ in our gospel lesson. By chapter 17, they’ve been following Jesus for a while – and they probably think they’re getting the hang of it. – “Yeah – I can do this. I can handle just about anything Jesus might throw at me.” +++ But, just before our reading, Jesus drops a bombshell on them:: “If another disciple sins… and there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” +++ “Now, hold up…” the apostles though, “to be like Jesus, I might have to forgive the same person 7 times a day, day after day after day?” (They must have felt the same panic I had felt as Jake was sitting there, looking at me – waiting for an answer. “Jesus, you are asking more from me than I’m ready for.” And so, as today’s reading opens, the apostles blurt out:: “Increase our faith!” +++ +++ I need more faith for that… We always want to measure things, don’t we? – Quantify it:….. “I have enough faith to forgive – but if you want me to forgive over and over again, I’LL NEED SOME MORE” – “I have enough faith to be here sharing my life with these teenagers – but if you want me to help Jake, I’LL NEED SOME MORE” – Is that how faith works? Like gas?? “I have enough to drive to the CVS, but if we’re going to Patchogue, I’ll need some more.” Like sugar?? “I have enough for my coffee all week, but if I’m going to make those cookies, I’LL NEED SOME MORE.” +++ Is that how faith works? +++ But at least we – and the disciples – are not being selfish when we ask for more faith, right? It’s well-intentioned – not like asking for more wealth, or more power, or more respect. Jesus should be happy when the apostles ask for more faith – right? +++ But he’s not. In fact, Jesus gets cranky with them. “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.”

Jesus is telling us:: “When things get hard, the first thing you assume is that you don’t have enough to handle it – that you aren’t enough, when you already are – you assume that you can’t do something, when you already can.” +++ +++ I am with you. +++ I am IN you – +++ that’s all you need. +++ Faith isn’t just something you have enough of, or don’t. +++ You have Christ. +++ That’s all you need! +++ Now – what will you DO with him? +++ So, I wondered, where can we find examples of people ‘Doing Faith?’ I started thinking about Jesus’ encounters in the Gospels. Whom does he praise for their faith?:: We find the hemorrhaging woman who touches the hem of his garment, a leper who returns to thank Jesus, the woman...
young Christian theology had it all wrong. These false teachers included Jewish, Gnostic, and ascetic ideas, as well as views of the resurrection that contradicted the church’s teachings. The theological and social fabric of the church was threatened – and leaders were overwhelmed. They felt unprepared – not skilled enough (or good enough) – to know what to say – to know how to meet this challenge. +++ And so, the letter reminds Timothy – and us – that he does have all he needs: We have “the gift of God” within us – the power of God to rely on – a spirit of love and power and self-discipline. +++ You can have confidence to teach what Christ taught us – to live in his example. +++ He gives you all the strength you need.

Faith doesn’t have to be dramatic. It doesn’t have to be impressive – it’s not something to measure: “More faith or Less faith.” It’s not something we make so by declaring it – by deciding to let Christ into your heart… It’s orienting yourself to the Christ who is already in your heart. – It’s turning your face to him the best way you know how – every day – all the time. Faith is a response. – It’s a way of life. – It’s something you DO. +++ +++ Having faith doesn’t mean you’ll never fail. It doesn’t mean you will always know the right words to say – or that you will be courageous – or that you won’t have doubt – or anxiety. +++ +++ The Good News is: in Christ there is room for failure… in Christ there is room for fear… for doubt. There is room for you to be less than perfect – because Christ IS perfect, and you live in his grace: so you will always have what you need.

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Timothy thought he wasn’t enough to protect the church from false teachers – but acting through Christ who was within him – the church survived and grew. +++ The apostles thought they weren’t enough to forgive as Christ commanded them – but through Christ they already had the faith they needed. +++ The people of Israel thought they weren’t enough to hope for redemption from exile in a foreign land – but God was true to the Covenant and brought them home again. +++ I thought I wasn’t enough to reassurance a desperate young man, but through Christ I found the words. +++ Jake thought he wasn’t enough to hope for forgiveness, but the Holy Spirit brought him into a church… where he confessed his sins… repented,… and through Christ… Jake was washed clean. +++ ALL of us were enough through Christ. +++ So… I wonder… what about YOU?? Where do you feel like you should be more than you are – better than you are? +++ Maybe you get angry more often than you’d like… Maybe you struggle for the right words to say… Or you feel unreliable… Or you’ve hurt someone you love… +++ Maybe you feel unworthy of love… Or you suffer from an illness… or addiction… +++ And you tell yourself – you believe – that you just fall short somehow… that you need to be more +++ This morning – I declare to you: YOU ARE ENOUGH. +++ You have all you need! +++ Christ is within you… Lean into him. +++ Orient your life toward him. +++ And DO faith.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.