

In our gospel reading this morning the disciples cry out, "*Increase our faith!*" This seems like a universal cry to me, for so-called "people of faith" as well as those whose faith isn't as obvious.

Everybody has faith in something. You might have faith in yourself. Or you might have faith in love. Or you might have faith in transformative power of art. Or you might have faith in certain truisms: a penny saved is a penny earned, or Winners Never Quit and Quitters Never Win. (I read that book as a 6<sup>th</sup> grader and it has taken years of therapy for me to recover from it! Combine it with *The Little Engine That Could* and you're doomed to an existence of endless Type A misery.)

I've noticed from bumper stickers that some people in Charlottesville have faith in homebirth: "*Peace on Earth Begins with Homebirth.*" Who knew? Apparently, all we need to do is send some midwives to the West Bank! Other people think that if you practice random acts of kindness then things will get better. Many people just have faith in the system – the American Way to Success in Life.

I know young mothers that are agonizing about whether their 18 month old will be accepted to the "right" pre-school. Because everyone knows that you've got to get in the right pre-school in order to get in the right K-12 prep school in order to get in the right college in order to get in the right graduate school in order to make the right salary in order to meet the right kind of spouse in order to live in the right kind of house in the right kind of neighborhood in order to join the right kind of clubs in order to have the right kind of children that you must then get into the right kind of preschool... The wheel in the sky keeps on turning, doesn't it? And it doesn't stop until you are buried in the right kind of graveyard.

All of this is to say that everyone's got faith in something. Even faith in the fact that you have faith in nothing is faith in something. There is no such thing as pure nihilism.

"*Increase our faith!*" the disciples cry. It is a universal cry and a specifically Christian cry. It is the cry of every honest Christian I've ever known. Just this past week I've talked to several people who have cried some version of this. And I've cried it myself, of course. Basically, we know that we should have faith – and really do have faith that God has a plan and that all things work for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose, but knowing and feeling are two different things, aren't they?

Then many of us deepen the dilemma by feeling guilty for what we see as our lack of faith. "Oh, what a bad Christian I am!" Then we're haunted by *The Little Engine That Could*: I think I can, I think I can.... So, we just try harder to generate the faith we need to get up the hill and be a Winner That Never Quits. But it just doesn't pan out. Maybe if we'd just been born at home things would have been different.

It's clear that faith does not come from will power or effort. And it is a cruel thing to tell someone. I had a friend in college who was in need of physical healing for some handicap. She was part of a Christian Fellowship that was hot and heavy into Spiritual Growth and Holiness. They prayed for her to be healed of her problem. When she wasn't, they told her that it was because she didn't have enough faith.

Faith never comes by someone telling you to have faith. When someone tells you to do something, you usually react by doing the opposite thing. My friend Drew Rollins sent me the newspaper article he read last Sunday morning. He is the Episcopal Chaplain at LSU. During football games, kids play on the Indian Mounds by the stadium, the only elevation in all of Baton Rouge. The Mounds are an old Indian burial site, so signs were put up that said, "Please do not slide on the Mounds." There was a picture in the paper of Drew's son David galloping up the Indian Mound with a sign in his hand. The caption said, "*Children used 'Please do not slide on the Mounds' signs as makeshift sleds on the LSU Mounds prior to the LSU/W. Virginia football game on Saturday.*"

So if faith does not come from being told to have faith, how does it come, how does it increase? Because it is clear that we need faith, want faith, want more faith, an increase in faith. Well, faith is not an internal mechanism that we can just switch on with our effort. Faith is not like a small ember in a fire that we can fan into flame with a little work. I'm one of those guys who is always messing with the fire. It will be roaring away and I'll interrupt a deep conversation in order to make it roar hotter or higher. "You're mother is dying? Uh, hold that thought. I need to go get more kindling." Faith isn't a flame that requires our constant attention.

So, how does faith increase if not by command or by effort? Faith is triggered by need. More than that, faith in God is a gift triggered by human impossibility. This is clear from Jesus' response to the disciples. "*If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and planted into the sea' and it would obey you.*" Unless you happen to possess telekinetic powers, what Jesus suggests is clearly in the realm of human impossibility. When cross the line between possible and impossible, then you've entered the land of faith. Where your own road of human effort ends is precisely where faith in God begins.

Another way to say this is that faith is found in the straight between Scylla and Charybdis. I told a friend the other day that he is admirably navigating the strait between Scylla and Charybdis of his particular situation. He said, "Wow. Thanks, I really appreciate that. Uh, what are Scylla and Charybdis?"

You might remember that Scylla and Charybdis were the awful sea monsters that Odysseus had to sail between. Both were deadly; if you steered clear of one then you were in the fatal grasp of the other. Scylla had six heads on long necks who ate sailors as they passed, while Charybdis had a single gaping mouth that sucked in huge quantities of water, and belched them out three times a day, creating deadly whirlpools. Basically, if you are between Scylla and Charybdis, you are between a rock and a hard place. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

So, if faith is to be found, it is to be found between the Scylla and Charybis of your life – in the humanly impossible situation. This is clear from the context of the disciples' plea, "Increase of faith." They cry out for increase of faith because Jesus had just told them that if someone does them wrong 7 times in a single day, and asks for forgiveness each of those 7 times, then they were required to forgive the offender. Can you imagine! Truism says, "fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me." Pride says, "I will not be anyone's doormat." Jesus says, "*forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times saying "I repent", you must forgive him.*"

"*The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'*" No wonder. Where in your life are you between Scylla and Charybdis? In that strait is where you will find the God who says, "*With men, it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.*" Because faith has really much less to do with you than it does with God.

You might think about it this way. It's winter and you need to cross over a frozen lake in order to get home to warmth and safety. There is no way around the lake and it's getting colder and darker by the second. You've got to go across. But, you're not sure if the lake is completely frozen in the middle, and if the ice breaks and you go under, then you'll surely freeze to death. But if you don't get home, you'll also surely freeze to death. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't.

Now the amount of faith that you have in the strength and sturdiness of the ice really has no effect on the ice itself, does it? You can have all the faith in the world that the ice will hold up, but if it's not frozen solid, it will crack. Or you can have just the tiniest whisper of faith in the ice, faith the size of a mustard seed. If the ice is solid, it will hold you of little faith and even people of no faith or every kind of faith. Faith is rooted not internally (I think I can), but externally (God is Faithful and with God all things are possible.)

In the strait between Scylla and Charybdis, we are forced to look to God. And every single time, you will find that God is faithful. The ice is solid. It's safe to cross. You're going to be O.K.

When I was in Seminary, a professor suffered through the horrible death of his son. The circumstances were tragic. My professor decided to preach at his son's funeral. The Virginia Seminary Chapel was packed. When the time came for the sermon, my professor, full of suffering and grief, climbed into the pulpit. He said, "*I've been to the bottom. And I'm here to tell you...that the bottom is firm.*" Amen.