

The first century disciples knew Jesus's touch. They knew his voice. But we have not had that experience. However much we long to touch him and hear him speak to us, we do not “know” Jesus that way. To be in relationship with Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Son of God, we have to rely on faith, don't we? And, thanks be to God, we have the Gospel to teach us how to have faith, and we have worship to connect us with our Lord so that we can express our faith in community, and we have the opportunity to share a holy meal with our friends to remember why we have faith that the Lord is in us and we in him.

So what does the Gospel today say about this relationship that is based on faith? In the first verses of this 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, Jesus had told his disciples not to cause their fellow believers to abandon the faith, and to forgive others whenever they repented of their sins. He warned the disciples not to cause others to stumble and challenged them to be more forgiving. Jesus's apostles didn't believe they were up to these tasks and asked him to increase their faith. They begged Jesus – their master – their teacher – their closest friend– the man they loved the most – to give them more faith. Jesus told them – and he is telling us – that with genuine faith, however small, anything is possible. If we had faith the size of a mustard seed – if we had just this much faith – we could move mountains – we could take the tallest palm tree and plant it in the Gulf.

When studying today's Gospel reading I saw this “mustard seed” teaching with new eyes. I had never noticed that it was after the hard teaching to the disciples – all his followers – about the sin of leading others astray and the requirement of forgiving not just three times, as the Rabbis required, but seven times, that it was the apostles who asked for more faith. It was the 12 who did not understand. Of all his followers, the apostles should have known the power of faith in their own community. Jesus had taught

them that faith was a dynamic process – that they were always growing in their faith – as are we. Our faith is constantly developing. And faith is not a matter of just our own strength – our own will to just do it – to just have faith. Our faith – our being saved through our own faith – is not of our own doing – it is by grace. The apostles misunderstood Jesus’s teachings – the sin of leading others to sin and about the power of forgiveness. They assumed that their faith was insufficient to live up to his two difficult laws, so they asked for more. Jesus then shook their faith. He shattered their illusions about faith. Why they didn’t even have faith the size of a mustard seed – they didn’t have this much faith [touching two fingers together]. They had missed the point – and I fear we often do too. The apostles needed to understand – and we need to understand – that faith can enable God to work in a person’s life in ways that defy human experience. Jesus assured them– and he is assuring us – if we had even a little faith – even this much [fingers together]– then it would be possible to live up to his teachings. With faith we could serve others as Jesus did if we had just this much faith [fingers together].

So faith is not really about quantity then but quality! This much [fingers together] versus this much [arms wide stretched] matters not. And faith is not just vertical between the believer and God, but horizontal affecting relationships between friends – and among the whole community and the world. Jesus’s closest friends were bewildered – again – and did not understand what he was teaching them about their faith. They needed to trust that their offering of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord would grow their faith – not in amount but in depth. And the power of even a little faith cannot be underestimated.

The apostles must have thought that Jesus was holding them to extraordinary unreachable standards! They thought that their faith was inadequate. They thought that they needed more faith – more faith rather than a new way of expressing that faith. How were they to learn to heal and forgive – how could they live into a better relationship with God and their brothers and sisters? They felt they needed more – more faith.

Several times in my life I thought that I needed more, more faith, to be able to do what I felt called to do. I recall the desperation of feeling inadequate. I knew so many people of enormous faith. I thought that I fell short, so I must not have enough – enough faith. When our daughter Sara was diagnosed with lymphoma our son Troy got right up in my face and asked me “Where is your faith was now, Mama?” I heard him asking “How much faith do you have now, Mama?” He and Sara were the same age, and he suffered along with her throughout her diagnosis and treatment. And he celebrated when she was healed. But at the time, I thought I didn’t have enough faith when I was actually struggling to have better faith. The quality of faith may wax and wane throughout our lives. But we live in Christian community so that when the quality of one friend’s faith is at its lowest, we can bring their faith back to life. It is what friends do. We can hold our friends in relationship with us and God and that speaks of the ever-growing powerful faith in our community. Faith is the greatest force in the world!

So it really is quality not quantity that matters. Did the disciples and the apostles have all they needed? Do we have all we need? Do we have faith – sufficient faith? Let me say again, this much [fingers together] or this much [arms wide] – it does not matter. When we are faced with hard questions of our beliefs, when we are faced with living up to what seems to be impossibly high standards, what are we to do? Should we ask God to increase our faith? Or might we ask the Lord to teach us how to be faithful? God may just answer saying that we should ask our friends here at St. Andrew’s By-the-Sea – here in Destin– to help our faith to grow – in quality not quantity. We should remind one another what faith in our own church community looks like. When faced with what seems to be unreachable goals, are we to trust that we have enough? We do have enough. We have more than enough. God has provided all that we need. We have enough to sustain us. We have enough to reach out in faith to one another and to our friends on the streets of Destin and to friends we have yet to meet. Have faith. We have enough. We need only grow the quality our faith so that we can share it with others.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.