

Message: "Increase Our Faith!"

It's good to be back with you this Sunday. Esperanza and I enjoyed last weekend, exploring the Carlsbad area, but it wasn't the same. We both said that. We missed worshipping God with you. I appreciate you more than you know. I wish I was better at expressing my feelings. As Esperanza reminds me, "It's good to use your words."

So let me say this, "I love you." You're the ones I care for when times are good and easy as well as when things are bad and difficult. I know there are occasions when I have spoken or acted in hurtful ways.

Please forgive me. I have certainly forgiven you. That's saying a lot for each of us. It takes faith to really forgive someone when they hurt us. It's easy to say "I forgive you" when what we're really thinking is, "But I'm not going to forget OR give you another chance to hurt me or take advantage of me." That isn't true forgiveness. That's often just a way of minimizing the chance of further conflict or public visibility. We'd rather be invisible than have others know we're vulnerable.

False forgiveness is a coping mechanism. True forgiveness involves a change in the way we see our relationships. Jesus showed the disciples that radical love means we practice radical forgiveness. We really, truly forgive others with all our power and turn control of the matter over to God. Sounds easy, but in practice, this is really hard.

Speaking of practice, you may have noticed this set of golf clubs. They are mine (and no, they're not up for auction). I bought them more than 20 years ago. They cost me a pretty penny at the time.

Do you know the last time I played golf? About 5 years ago! Yet the clubs still take up space. I haul them from place to place every time we move. I even take them out of storage every once in a while, so I can get to the stuff that's stored behind the bag. You know what's worse? I ENJOY playing golf! While I'm not very good, it's good outdoor exercise with interesting people.

Is our faith like these clubs? When we forget to use our faith, relying on other means to get by in life, we're ignoring what's right in front of us. What we would enjoy. We rely on our own physical, emotional, mental and spiritual strength. We forget to rely on God.

There's only one problem: at some point in your life, your strength will run out. You'll find yourself at the end of your rope with nowhere to turn. You'll be looking for that bag of faith, but you won't even know where it is. For many of us, that realization was years ago. We know God is in control, but maybe we've slid back into old habits. The clubs are back in storage. For some of us, that realization might have been last week. The pain and hurt is still fresh. We're hoping that our coping mechanism will keep us stable long enough for the hurt to go away, for us to forget what was done. For a few of us, the realization that we are at the end of our strength is today. We're here, holding on, holding back the tears and anger, hoping to get something from this time to help us get through the rest of the day.

Whatever your circumstance is, please hear this, "God loves you." Everything will be all right. No matter how deep your hurt may be, you can turn it over to God. Forgive and let God heal your body, mind and soul. God isn't in a rush. Take your time. Breathe. Trust God.

Right after Jesus taught them about forgiveness, the twelve disciples closest to him – his friends, courageously asked for a gift:

"Increase our faith!"

What a bold request!

Clearly Jesus' friends are looking for something special.

It begs the question, "What is faith?"

Whatever faith is, it gives us the power and ability to forgive people who hurt us, over and over, without becoming jaded or losing our ... faith.

The best place to turn to learn more about faith is scripture.

Here are a few statements about faith you may know. The author of the book of Hebrews put it this way:

*"Faith is the reality of what we hope for,
the proof of what we don't see" (11:1).*

Not so clear. The author went on, *"By faith we understand that the universe has been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible"* (vv2-3). That helps.

Faith creates. It has power. Faith is what connects the spiritual and the material. Faith is what we believe in. A word sometimes synonymously used is **trust**.

Jesus was amazed at the faith - the trust, he saw in some people:

The Roman centurion who said to Jesus, “*Lord, I don’t deserve to have you come under my roof. Just say the word and my servant will be healed*” (Matthew 8:8). The soldier understood Jesus’ authority.

A Canaanite woman rejected by the disciples said, “*Lord, help me.*” When Jesus said, “*It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,*” she said, “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*” Jesus replied, “*Woman, great is your faith!*” (Matthew 15:23-28).

The centurion and the woman are foreigners, yet they boldly ask Jesus for help on behalf of others. They take a risk and their pure, simple trust is rewarded. The centurion’s servant is healed and so is the woman’s daughter.

Paul wrote about faith in his second letter to the people at Corinth:

“*We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us*” (4:7)

“*So we do not lose heart ... we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal*” (4:16, 18).

The only way we can forgive others is by trusting them, even when we have no reason to do so!

How can we do that? The only way I know to forgive others unconditionally is to love them unconditionally. The only example of unconditional love we have is Jesus’ love for each and every one of us.

- No matter what we’ve done, Jesus loves and forgives us.
- No matter how often we’ve turned away, Jesus loves and forgives us.
- No matter whether we feel like we deserve it or not, Jesus loves and forgive us.
- Even when we say “if they only knew,” Jesus knows and he loves and forgives us.

Jesus' last words from the cross give proof of his love,*“Forgive them” (Luke 23:34)*

That's the power of divine faith, love and forgiveness. That's the gift we receive when we turn to Jesus and ask for forgiveness. That's the gift we give when we forgive someone else.

We all believe in something. The question is “What or who do you believe in?” When your strength runs out and you have no outs left, who will you turn to? Friends and family won't help. Money, titles and popularity won't help. Your good works won't help. God will help.

Trust God. Believe in Jesus. Jesus said, *“You don't need more faith. There is no 'more' or 'less' in faith. If you have a bare kernel of faith, say the size of a poppy seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, 'Go jump in the lake,' and it would do it.”*

Another way of saying it: “Have living faith.” Jesus used a seed because it's a living thing that has a ton of potential. Yet seeds are dormant until we plant them. We can't cast mountains aside or into the sea if our faith is dead or dormant.

“To reach their potential, seeds must be planted. Surface-level faith doesn't produce anything. Our faith needs to be buried deep inside of us so it can grow. Until it has been tested and can grow deep roots, our faith remains small. Yet it was never intended to be contained in the small package of a seed. Your faith has always been intended to grow. Think of how big a tree is compared to the size of the seed. God's desire is that our faith would grow exponentially, but we've got to plant it first.”¹

With Jesus by your side, you can do anything. Remember: what seems impossible for us is possible for God. Need proof? Listen: *“See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are”* (1 John 3:1).

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God”
(Romans 8:14).

Jesus said, *“You are my friends if you follow my command to love on another”* (John 15:15).

¹ <https://devotionsbychris.com/tag/what-does-faith-the-size-of-a-mustard-seed-mean/>

Love is the answer, the key to forgiveness. And forgiveness gives life.

No matter where you are in life today, I invite you to join me and pray with the boldness of the apostles:

Lord, increase our faith!

Let us pray ...

“If I really had faith the size of a mustard seed,
What would I do?

Would I wave a hand to hurl Mount Kilimanjaro into Lake Victoria
Just to prove that I could?

If I really had mustard-seed faith, what would I do?

Would I start by extending a hand of peace
To the church across the street
Whose sign says something different from mine?

Would I start by extending a hand of peace
To the one who terrorizes the old people down the street?
Or to the grizzled homeless person who sits on the corner with a sign?

Would I start by extending my hand of peace
To those who brawl on schoolyards
And to those who brawl on battlefields
In search of a future with hope?

Maybe I could begin by just taking my hand of peace
Out of its hiding place
Long before the moment
That I cup my hands to receive Communion.

O, Lord, Increase our faith!”²

We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

² Extend a Hand: A Meditation for World Communion Sunday (Based on Luke 17:5) by Safiyah Fosua

Luke 17:5-10 (CEB)

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

The Lord replied, “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.

“Would any of you say to your servant, who had just come in from the field after plowing or tending sheep, ‘Come! Sit down for dinner’? Wouldn’t you say instead, ‘Fix my dinner. Put on the clothes of a table servant and wait on me while I eat and drink. After that, you can eat and drink’? You won’t thank the servant because the servant did what you asked, will you? In the same way, when you have done everything required of you, you should say, ‘We servants deserve no special praise. We have only done our duty.’”

Chris Hendrix writes: “If you had faith that was living.” Jesus used a mustard seed because it’s a living thing that has a ton of potential. The seeds in my bag will never grow and reach their potential as long as they are in that bag. They’re dormant until I plant them. We can’t cast mountains aside or into the sea if our faith is dead or dormant.

To reach their potential, those seeds must be planted. Surface level faith doesn’t produce anything. Our faith needs to be buried deep inside of us so that it can grow. Until it has been tested and can grow roots deep inside of us, our faith remains small. It was never intended to be contained in the small package of a seed. Your faith has always been intended to grow. Think of how big a tree is compared to the size of the seed. God’s desire is that our faith would grow exponentially, but we’ve got to plant it first.

In my yard, I have sweet gum trees and oak trees. This time of year, my yard gets filled with the spikey fruit of the sweet gum and also acorns. Year after year, they scatter their seeds all over my lawn in hopes of reproducing other trees. God’s desire is not just for your faith to grow into a tree, it’s so that you will scatter seeds of faith and reproduce as well. A tree that doesn’t reproduce is worthless. Remember the fig tree that hadn’t reproduced figs (with seeds in them) when Jesus walked by?

Today, let’s stop focusing on casting mountains aside or into the sea part of this saying. Let’s focus on having an alive faith that grows and reproduces. Yes it would be nice to be able to do those things, but that is the potential of our faith. It is the end result of a faith that is planted and grows inside of us. I’m thankful for my bag of seeds from Israel, but quite honestly, they’re useless if I just leave them in the bag. Don’t leave your faith in the bag. ³

³ <https://devotionsbychris.com/tag/what-does-faith-the-size-of-a-mustard-seed-mean/>