A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*“The Seed of Faith”*

Luke 17:5

October 6, 2019

The apostles cry out to Jesus “Increase our faith!” When they do, they already believe that that is something Jesus can do and will do. They demonstrate confidence that faith and growing faith are gifts from God. They experienced faith as a gift from God and they knew they needed more of it if they were going to do all that Jesus was calling them to do.

What is faith, after all, but the conviction of belief that God exists and is the creator and ruler of all things, that Jesus is the Messiah through whom we have eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, and confidence in God in Christ through the Spirit who can be trusted. Going around with Jesus as they did for so long, their faith both encouraged and challenged in every possible way, the 12 finally just break down. “Increase our faith!” they said. It’s a very simple prayer. There’s not much to it. It’s not complicated to understand, to pronounce, or to remember. I have some measure of faith; I need a lot more. Help me, God.

The apostles request puts a question directly before us: if this were your prayer, if you prayed, “Lord, increase my faith” and God answered this prayer, what do you think would happen? What’s the result of such a prayer offered and answered?

Well, what you hope is that God answers your prayer and you feel something important shift deep within you. Something important changes. It feels like increased peace, newfound spiritual power. You feel more confident in God, more at peace with yourself; You believe deep down what you’ve struggled to believe for a long time. You feel new joy no matter what the circumstances. You are renewed. It feels like you have more faith. And that feels like a gift, the kind described by Paul to Timothy in Timothy’s own crisis of faith:

“Fan into flames the gift of God within you; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of power, of love, of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed of suffering for the gospel. You have a holy calling, not by your works but by God’s good purposes.”

That’s just the thing we long for. That the the little spark of conviction within us would be fanned into a flame of unwavering faith. We know we need it because very often we feel just the opposite. We feel like spiritual cowards, like faith weaklings, like we don’t love like we should, and not self-disciplined like we should be. Doubt is a strong dark force that can lead into despair. We’re not alone in this. Even though Paul himself had laid hands on him, Timothy struggled in just the same way. Even though his mother and grandmother had passed on to him their faith. Even though he had seen the power of God demonstrated in miracles and in changed lives; even though he himself had preached the gospel; when we meet him in the letter, tears run down his face. He’s in spiritual crisis. Most people are at some point. Young preachers are counseled to remember that every person in the pew is sitting next to their own pool of tears.

 We long for the sacred fire to burn within us again. Lord, fan the flames, increase my faith, “restore unto me the joy of my salvation.”

Imagine that is your prayer and that God simply condescends to answer it; you go to bed praying for increased faith and the next day, you’re a different person. You immediately have true conviction that God exists and is the creator and ruler of all things, that Jesus is the Messiah through whom you have eternal salvation in the kingdom of God, and you have supreme trust in God through the Spirit.

Who wouldn’t fall on their needs with this prayer at night if God simply downloaded faith like this while we sleep? But it’s not usually that easy. ‘Increase my faith’ the apostles learned and we learn, is a hazardous prayer. It’s not unlike praying, “Lord, help me learn patience.” I’m telling you, be careful if you pray for patience. You will be given opportunities to be patient. Lord, help me learn patience. Well, you know how this goes right? The next day you don’t wake up with supernatural patience. The next day’s mail holds your jury duty summons, and all the red lights will be yours, and the person in front of you in the drive through is ordering 13 burgers, each made specially, and oh by the way, you have a medical issue, it looks kind of serious; we need to see you in 6 weeks from Tuesday. Can you come in then? You pray for patience, and you may just learn to grow in patience.

You pray for increased faith, and you should watch out in just the same way. Your faith is going to be given the opportunity to grow by being tested, stretched, and challenged. Are you sure you know what you’re asking? Remember the one of whom you are asking it and remember what it meant for him to trust his heavenly Father with his mission and his life. Jesus isn’t a self-help, personal empowerment peddler. Faith, Christian faith, baptismal faith can be so very costly. Jesus told the apostles to take up their cross and follow him and many other hard things until they told him they’d need a lot more faith than they had to do all of that.

Since telling them to take up their cross, Jesus has been unveiling the cost of discipleship one teaching, saying, parable after another. Teaching them the shape of Christian Life, reminding them of radical hospitality at the table of God and how God’s people must open their understanding of God’s heart is to live through them to friend and enemy.

He’s been telling them of God’s desperate compassion for lost sheep and prodigal children even at the risk of making the righteous resentful. He’s been teaching them of the dangers of money that can afflict anyone and how God’s people make costly sacrifices. He’s been teaching them of the temptations to sin all around and even in the midst of that of how God’s people care called to holiness. And then, he teaches the radical call to forgive, and forgive, and forgive those who have hurt you.

Listening to him, it really sunk in for them what the way of Jesus means for all who follow him. That’s what it meant then and what it means for us now. What if someone told you this is what faith in Jesus looks like. This is the Christian life. If you’re baptized, you’re baptized into a life that looks like this, and there is no other. What would you say--what could you say? Either “I’m out of here” or “Increase my faith” or “I believe, help my unbelief.” We all need God’s help to live the life that our faith calls us to.

The apostle’s understood this. They understood the gravity of the invitation to faith. For them, by this point, it was not an option to negotiate to diminish the call, temper it, or domesticate it; they understood the radical nature of the way of following Jesus and would understand when their time came, what it meant to lead the new church in the way of faith. They lived it; they would all die for it eventually.

How much faith does it take to be part of this movement? It sounds like an impossible amount. But the apostles gave us their legacy, passed down in one case through a woman named Lois to her daughter Eunice to Eunice’s son Timothy and in countless other ways--through pastors to congregations, parents to children, and friends to one another.

It’s passed down one seed at a time.

The prayer: “Increase my faith” **is** the mustard seed. It is the mustard seed that can grow to do the impossible once its planted in your soul.

What grows from that seed is a gift of God that can and will do much more than uproot a tree or move a mountain; it can uproot kingdoms and move the world.

It can uproot injustices and lead hearts to love.

You give me a big enough spoon, and I can move a mountain on my own. But if you want me to forgive my enemy, Lord, increase my faith. The seed can change lives, renew communities, hold on in life’s terrible storms, withstand in unimaginable persecution, and even overcome death.

This faith lives in you already. Let it grow, and pass it on, one seed at a time.

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