

The apostles said to the Lord “increase our faith”.

In the name...

“Increase our faith” – I imagine the tone of this request to have had an urgency about it – a deep plea from the disciples to Jesus – Lord PLEASE please, increase our faith – give us more!

Why such a plea at this point in our gospel? To find a possible answer to this question we have to go back to the beginning of this chapter – a part of the Gospel that the lectionary compilers in their wisdom decided to omit.

After the gospel we heard last week –the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man – we skip over verses 1-4 in chapter 17 to begin with the disciples begging for an increase of faith. In those verses that we skip Jesus tells the disciples two things – first if any one leads a new member of the faith astray – Jesus calls them ‘Little ones’ – it would be better for them that they have

a millstone tied around their necks and be cast into the waters.  
So that's pretty concerning.

Then Jesus goes on to say that as members of a community they must look out for each other – and if one sins the others must rebuke the offender– imagine for a minute that you are to tell the person sitting in front of you right now or behind you that they have sinned and need to repent - how does that sound?

And then on top of that you must forgive him or her if there is repentance. And how many times must we do that? Seven times, Jesus says – seven being a number that means to infinity and beyond.

So – we have to make sure we don't cause anyone else to stumble, we have to point out other peoples' sin to them AND we have to forgive them an endless number of times!!

Increase our faith Lord – the disciples have to be wondering - can I really do this, am I really up to what will be required of me?

I don't think it is only the disciples that make this plea – I know it has been my prayer many times. In the dark moments of our lives, when we are touched to the core by the pain and suffering, the injustice and the oppression that is all around us – when the news seems an endless cycle of tragedy – when people in our own families are hurting and we cannot help them or fix things – in those times who among us has not fallen on our knees and cried out– Lord I don't know if I can do this, I'm not up to this, please Lord - increase my faith!

Indeed the plea to increase my faith comes from a deep place of longing, a place of anxiety – a place of fretting as our Psalm talks about today. Our Psalm says “do not fret yourself” when

evil seems all around you, when others seem to benefit from their evil ways while good and innocent people suffer.

Do not fret – but rather put your trust in God. Isn't that what faith is really – trust –and so the disciples plead for more trust in the midst of their anxieties and uncertainties. They have cast their lot with this man Jesus – they left everything to follow him when they'd only just met him - and now after spending time and learning what following him means – they are fretting – can I really do this – do I have enough trust in this Jesus – in this God whom he presents to me – am I really up to the task ahead?

In a world that always seeks the “more” – more stuff, more money, more prestige, more success, more power, and judges people accordingly – is it any wonder that we might believe that we need more faith too. That if we can stockpile it, build up a reserve of it then when the dark times come we can cash

in and get through whatever comes. But what if I don't have quite enough?

We fret. We worry. We plead for more – Lord increase our faith!

Some of you may remember years ago when stores gave out Green Stamps – did they have them in Texas? I remember growing up in New Jersey and seeing my mother collect green stamps every time she shopped at the grocery store. I loved to take the sheets of green stamps she got and lick them and stick them into the books the store provided.

We had a catalog of all the neat stuff you could get when you had enough stamps – and we'd decide which one we were going to save up for – and when we had enough Mom and I would go to the redemption center and turn them in and go

home with our little goody. It was fun. You saved up enough and you got something good.

Today, I've replaced that with numerous apps on my phone that help me keep track of the rewards I earn when I go to different restaurants and fast food chains. If I get enough points I get a free meal, or dessert, or appetizer or something. The more I save up the better my reward.

Sometimes, faith and trust and grace can seem like green stamps. We want to save them up, stockpile them and then trade them in when we need something. And if we have enough then surely we should be entitled to the prize that we want – right?

When we apply the world's economy to God's economy we make faith – trust – a commodity to be acquired – a bank account to be built up – a stockpile to cash in. Too often that is

how this part of this text is read – if you have enough faith then you should expect to get what you need – what you ask for – you should be cured of that disease, your loved one’s relationship should be healed, there should be peace in the world – and if there isn’t – well then there must be something wrong with my faith – my trust – I must not have enough – I must need more.

And if I’m lacking in faith – this teaching asserts – it’s because I have not been working hard enough.

But NO – Jesus says – that’s not how it is with God. Just an itty bitsy little bit of trust is all you need – faith –trust are not transactions - bargains we make with God. We are not independent contractors who work a deal with God to get what we need in exchange for doing what we are called to do.

It’s not a quid pro quo relationship.

We do not work on a point system, faith is not green stamps we collect and redeem. We don't get stamps to stick in God's book for what we do – 10 stamps for coming to church on Sunday, 5 stamps for praying every day, 100 stamps for going to that committee meeting – and then we get to cash them in, pick our reward – get an Atta girl or boy from God and then get a prayer answered.

Which brings us to the little parable Jesus tells at the end of our text today.

As we read this parable we must not miss the way Jesus turns the story on its head. He begins by saying – who among you would say to your slave “thank you” – in other words he is talking to the disciples and to us as if we were the Masters -- ---but- and here's the reversal - Jesus ends up by saying – and so when you have done all that you were ordered to do... The

Master has now become the slave – we are all slaves – slaves, servants of God.

None of us is in a position of master before the Lord. We are all in debt to God, we are all dependent on God for the very breath we breathe. We serve a God who owes us nothing and to whom we owe everything – to whom we come to this altar Sunday after Sunday and kneel with our hands outstretched to receive that which we cannot earn - and the only proper response – to this largesse is gratitude.

Right now as we gather here together some of us are dealing with illness and pain, some are dealing with fear of what is looming ahead, some of us are hurting over broken relationships and painful family situations, some of us are not sure whether we will have a job next week or be able to pay the bills. The list goes on.

Is it any wonder we want to cry out Lord I'm not sure I'm up to this - Lord, increase my faith!! Sometimes it is hard not to fret, to doubt, to lose our way. But if all were certain we really wouldn't need faith – trust – at all would we?

One of the great role models of our faith is St Theresa of Calcutta – Mother Theresa. Watching her and her sisters tend the sick and the dying day after day in the streets of Calcutta used to amaze and astound me – what kind of faith must this woman have to keep on doing this when the situation was so awful, when as soon as one person died another one was there to take his place?

I was even more astounded when, after her death, letters were made public that Mother Theresa had written to her confessor speaking of her deep struggle with her faith. Who could fault

her – how could one keep on when faced with so much suffering?

Surely Mother Theresa had cried out in her prayer - Lord increase my faith!!

But the most astounding thing to me is that despite those doubt she kept on caring for person after person, doing the work that had been set before her, one dying person after another with no end in sight - with sometimes no more than the faith the size of a tiny mustard seed.

This is the heart of what it means to trust – to empty ourselves, to let go of our control, our bargaining, our earning, our contracting, our deal making. In the words of our Eucharistic Prayer we ask God to bring all things – including all of us here - in subjection under Christ.

Ultimately it is all about God and God's power – and we are but worthless – that is powerless – slaves. We are called to let go of our control, to partner with God, to allow God to work in us, with us and through us.

God doesn't promise us that our faith will fix our problems, cure our diseases, make war go away or save the planet.

God does promise that God is with us in our doing and in our being, in our living, in our loving, in our weeping and in our rejoicing.

Jesus assures us that we have enough faith – for all the difficult times in life – even though it can seem a small and insignificant amount next to the daunting challenges we face.

It is enough because it doesn't rely on our ability to make it happen. We are but to serve our Master. And this Master is more than enough to hold us and carry us.

And here is the paradox of our faith – as we let go and become servants – slaves of God we come to know true freedom.

How freeing to know that we can simply do the work that is set before us with steadfastness and faithfulness trusting in a God whose love and grace and mercy and compassion can never be measured and that knows no end. Amen.