

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement
Florissant, Missouri
Proper 22 -- Year C
October 1-2, 2022
St. Luke 17:5-10; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
Second Timothy 1:1-14

No sooner do folks think that they have Jesus all figured out -- I mean, both non-believers and believers alike -- no sooner do folks think they have Jesus all figured out, than Jesus says something that leaves us scratching our heads. I suspect, over the past few Sundays more than a few preachers have reviewed the assigned Gospel Lesson for the day and been left scratching our heads. Just within the last few weeks, we have heard Jesus commend an employee who cheated his employer. We've heard Jesus tell folks to "hate father and mother, son and daughter." We've heard Jesus urge us to invite the dregs of society to our favorite family gatherings. And, now, today,...(get this)...we just heard Jesus talking about trees transplanting themselves into the sea on our say-so, and then saying that a worker who's already put in a grueling day in the field and then fixed his employer's dinner should now berate himself verbally for the privilege. Just when we thought we had Jesus all figured out,...

And, somewhere in the middle of all this, Jesus's disciples, perhaps, scratching their own heads, challenge Him to "increase our faith." And, perhaps that need is why some are of us in worship this weekend. It's surely why we see people streaming back into worship in times of crisis, as they did, for example, in the weeks following 9/11. "Increase our faith, Jesus. Tell us everything is going to be all right." In times of political turmoil and economic uncertainty, in times when a loved one is gravely ill or the business may fold, in times when our marriage is in trouble or we can't pay the mortgage, here we are, beating on God's door and challenging Jesus: "Increase our faith. Tell us everything is going to be all right."

But, when we realize that Jesus may actually be responding to that challenge, maybe, we'll stop scratching our heads and listen, even if what He is saying isn't what we expect to hear. You see, maybe we want Jesus to quote a half-dozen Bible passages which will explain everything. Maybe, we want Jesus to send us on a prayer retreat, where everything will come clear. Maybe, we just want Him to give us a compelling and well-reasoned argument that makes "faith" easy. And, through it all, we long to hear Him say, "Everything is gonna be all right." Disciples challenge Jesus, "Increase our faith," and the P.R. guy in each of us thinks, "Jesus, this would be a great time for a miracle; this would be a good time for three irrefutable proofs of God's goodness; this might even be a good time to usher in the Kingdom."

I'm sure, you've known folks like this, too, but I'm thinking of a few clergy friends, like John, who devoted his entire ministry to revitalizing an inter-city congregation, even if he had to mow lawns to help pay the bills. I'm thinking of Martin who's worked tirelessly for years improving the lives of the homeless. I'm thinking of Jerry, who took a call to a struggling rural parish and ran earth-moving equipment during the week to put food on the family table. And, I'm thinking of their wives who sacrificed right along with them. Perhaps, there's been a time in your life, too, as there has been in mine, when you were working 110 hours a week, only because you believed so passionately in the justice of the cause and in the merits of the people you were supporting. And you did it, not for the salary, not for the notoriety, not even for a "thank you," but solely because you couldn't imagine doing anything else, and your only regret is that you couldn't have done more. Or, as one pastor once said, "No-one in love ever asked, 'What's the least I can do?'"

No, to the folks who challenge Jesus, "Increase our faith," Jesus gives a two-part response, "Remember whom you serve, and, then, joyfully do your duty." In Jesus's vocabulary, "faith" is never a matter of sitting around, thinking about things, but rather of taking what you know to be true and then using it to make something happen. Jesus calls us to a life of faith, which is to say, a life of service to His Father, not so that it will be reciprocated, not so that we will be thanked, but because through that life of service we will discover whom it is that we have been serving, and our faith will increase, and so will our love, and so will our joy!

But, one of the best things about Jesus is that He never asks of us, He never expects of us, more than He is willing to do Himself. "The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve,..." He once said. And, when mealtime came, He tied a towel around His waist, go down on His hands and knees, and washed the feet of His disciples. "The Son of Man came, not be served, but to serve, and to give His life, as a ransom for many." This same Jesus Who told us to "take up our cross" also takes up His Cross. The same Jesus Who calls us to trust His Father's love, even in the face of death, Himself trusts that love, even in the face of death.

And, I believe He came to know that that love could be trusted, that His Father could be trusted, not because He sat around thinking about it, not because He outsmarted the great philosophers of His day, not because He was a walking concordance of Bible passages, but because, when you're in love -- as He is with us -- no-one ever asks, "What's the least I can do?" Because He believed so passionately in what He was doing that He couldn't do anything else, ...because, by giving of Himself completely in service to His Father, He discovered that His Father could be trusted, all the way to the Cross, all the way to the Empty Tomb.

Especially in days like these, marked by uncertainty on every front, we now come to Jesus, and we say, "Increase our faith." And, Jesus points us in the only direction that can make that possible. He points us down the path that He Himself has traveled and which He will also now travel with us, a path of unselfish service and devotion to the Father, a path where the milestones, the mile markers, are God's promises kept and our faith increased.

"Increase our faith," we say to Jesus; "help us learn to trust." And, Jesus, Who through His own life, ministry, service, death, and resurrection, has exemplified that you learn to trust by trusting, now travels with us down the only path where God can make that happen -- even if that leaves some folks scratching their heads, just when they thought they had Jesus all figured out.

Amen