

"The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" (Luke 17:5)

- I have noticed something about this presidential campaign season ~ something different from any other I can remember: Where are all the yard signs for *either* Donald or Hillary? Could it be that potential voters have so little [confidence](#) in *both* of them? Add this to the consistently low approval rating of congress. Or consider the evident widespread [distrust](#) in the leadership of corporate America. Together, these several things suggest a precarious situation. *Where is our faith* in the basic structure of government bequeathed to us by the Founders? Even though it may not be perfect, *do we still believe* our Republic is the better than any alternative?
- As you might guess, my goal here is not to lead a reflection on *politics* or *civics*. For the phrases I have just spoken are in many cases *similar* to the *ones* we employ when it comes to the Bible and our spiritual experience. In doing so, I deliberately used [a series of words that seem to overlap in meaning](#). I have mentioned varying amounts of [confidence](#); the presence or absence of [trust](#); [faith](#) in something given to us; and [belief](#) in something we know. But when it comes to hearing the Gospel, we need to appreciate the *difference* between two of these words ~ *faith and belief*. Doing so will help us understand what Jesus is saying.
- Notice how the disciples do not say, "Help us [believe!](#)" And notice that Jesus does not respond by saying, 'If you only had a small amount of [belief](#), you could do this or that.' When the disciples ask for [faith](#), or an increase of it, they are asking [rightly](#). Because [faith is always something that we receive](#). As Paul teaches us in 1st Corinthians , [like hope and love, faith is a gift](#).<sup>1</sup> And when Jesus says that *even the tiniest bit* of faith is enough for us to have access to great power, he tells an important truth. *Precisely because* faith is *from* God, the *amount* of it is not relevant to its meaning.
- This is why [faith is closer to trust, than it is to belief](#). Faith is [perceiving and relying upon what is true](#). Whereas belief is closer to a choice or an act of will. Belief is like [looking for something](#), whereas faith is like [seeing it](#). Belief has a

noun *and* a verb form, and can be *active* and self-initiated. But *faith* only has a noun form. Therefore, we say, 'I believe...'; *but we don't say, 'I faith...'* Belief may be measured by the extent of our confidence or commitment. But faith is always either/or ~ we have it, or we don't. *Believing is something that we do; whereas faith is a gift that we receive.* Therefore, *faith is something we need to be open to, rather than something that we will into place.*

- Tom Wright offers a helpful image here ~ he suggests that we think of faith as *being like a window.*<sup>2</sup> A window allows light to come in, and for us to see *what is there* to be seen. *If we are looking at the Creator and Redeemer of the universe, even the tiniest peep-hole will do.* By contrast, belief is about *how* we receive and embrace what we see. By making this distinction, we are in a better position to live into the reality of God's mission, rather than remain focused on our own. By remembering that faith is a gift *from God*, freely offered to us, we don't need to be concerned about *how much* we have of it. Yet, being concerned with our *belief*, and about *how much* we believe, will keep us absorbed with ourselves, and our own needs and wants.
- We need to take this a step further. Our short Gospel reading this morning omits the *context* for the disciples' request that Jesus increase their faith. They ask this after he tells them *they must forgive others, even as many as seven times* a day. Well, how can we do that? Not by *trying to believe* that those who have offended or hurt me *are to be* forgiven. Because I will probably never fully convince myself of that! Belief takes effort, and a commitment to engage something or someone. And these are responses that often fail us when we are most pressed or upset.
- The alternative is to consider how God has been absolutely *"for us"* ever since the creation of the world. So much so, that God has come into our midst, accepting the limitation of being found in human form. Human *believing failed* to embrace him on *his* terms, and only responded in rather qualified ways. To the point that God, in Christ, allowed himself *to be put out of this world.* Crucifixion was designed *not just* to cause death, but to *obliterate* someone, so

that nothing was left after the birds of the air had their way, and flesh had rotted. Human belief failed Jesus: one of the twelve disciples actively betrayed him. And then, one by one, the rest defected, as well.<sup>3</sup>

- We all have varying degrees of confidence, sincerity and conviction, when we say the creedal words, "I believe..." This is one reason why we say these words together in the *plural* form, in the Eucharist, because it helps us remember that *God's mission is not about our efforts, success or failure. God's mission is always for us*, precisely because of our complete *inability* to get beyond our own *falling-short*. In the end, *what matters is what God has done, and is still doing*, rather than *what we do* in response to what God has done. We are *to be so focused* on Christ that we don't spend much time or attention on our own success for failure.
- Here, we begin to see the deeper significance of the difference between belief and faith. When we are concerned with our *own belief*, either the constancy or the extent of it, we are absorbed with what *we* are doing or not doing, in relation to what *God* wants us to do. But when we focus on *faith*, which is always a gift, we open our eyes *to what God has done*, and is now doing. We are never able *fully* to be 'for God,' in the total way that God is 'for us.' Believing is our way of *trying* to live 'for God,' which as we know from experience is always *variable*. *Faith, by contrast, is perceiving that God is always, totally and forever, here 'for us.'*
- *Salvation comes to us by the gift of faith, and not through our efforts at belief.* Notice that, in offering a metaphor for faith, Jesus chooses something very *common*. It may not be common for us, since it's sometimes hard to find whole mustard seeds in grocery stores. But in Jesus' time and place, mustard seeds were common, not rare. Gospel faith can be just as common and familiar, rather than exceptional and extraordinary. *Grace, the source of Kingdom faith, is not rare or unusual.*
- *Also*, in pointing to the nature of faith, *Jesus choses something that grows through divine assistance, and apart from our will or effort.* Oh yes the

gardener can *affect* the growth process. But *growth* depends upon God. And if there are any results from planting a mustard seed, God is the one who sees to it before we can ever begin to take any credit for it.

- The apostles seem to be thinking that personal belief is a matter of power. So, by having more of it, they might bring *more glory* to the Kingdom and—of course—to themselves. But if faith has power, it only has power because we receive it from God. And because [received Gospel Faith opens our eyes to God's purposes and promises, the Lord gives faith to us for the sake of his Kingdom.](#)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See 1 Corinthians 13:13 in context, where this point is implicit. In the Christian ethical and moral tradition, faith, hope and love are referred to as the Theological virtues, and are seen as having a supernatural source, as compared with the so-called 'natural' or Cardinal virtues known to the ancient Greeks and Romans (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude {our courage}).

<sup>2</sup> See N.T. Wright's book, *Luke for Everyone*: "Faith is like a window through which you can see something. What matters is not whether the window is six inches or six feet high; what matters is the God that your faith is looking out on. If it's the creator God, the God active in Jesus and the Spirit, then the tiniest little peep-hole of a window will give you access to power like you never dreamed of." Wright, Tom (2001-01-19). *Luke for Everyone* (New Testament for Everyone) (p. 204). SPCK. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> This and the following paragraph reflect points made by Rowan Williams, in his Dubose Lectures exploring the Christology and Ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, September 28-29, 2016.