

Increase our faith

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, October 3, 2010: the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on 2 Timothy 1:1-14 and Luke 17:5-1.*

One of my favorite things to do, and one of the most important things I do, is spend time in Central Park. That's an internal requirement for me to live in Manhattan. And the truth is, wherever I live, I need to live near a park and spend time there.

So I was walking in Central Park yesterday, reveling in the crystal clear air, the October blue sky, the autumn angle of the light, savoring that rich fresh smell of newly damp earth, feeling my own soul expand and freshen after the rains and work of the week.

From studying this Gospel all week, images of seeds and trees were still planted in my mind. My route in the park took me through space after space where just over a year ago, I saw giant trees uprooted and toppled by the power of near-tornado-force winds. Not quite the mulberry tree, uprooted and planted in the sea, but still.

I encountered no mustard seeds, which I couldn't have seen anyway, but did find plenty of other seeds: loads of shiny brown chestnuts spilling out of their spiked pods, black walnuts snug in their spongy green globe husks, and some giant acorns.

And then, there, taped to a lamppost was a sign that made me laugh out loud: Seeds and Trees Workshop (arrow). I wondered if that workshop had anything to say about what seeds and trees have to do with increasing faith.

As Luke tells this story, when the apostles say to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" they are responding to Jesus' instructions in the verses just before the ones we heard: Don't be a stumbling block to those newer in the faith than you. If another disciple sins against you, and repents,

then you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and each time repents, then you must forgive every time.

If you've ever had a colleague, a friend, a family member sin against you even once, you may know how hard it is to forgive, and how long that can take. But seven times a day? The same person seven times in a day? One time is hard enough, maybe a saint could manage two or three, but who could manage seven? And then do it again the next day?

That's the point. What's required of those who follow Jesus, those who try as best they can to embrace and share Jesus' teachings, seems way too hard. No wonder those early disciples and apostles say, "Increase our faith!" Heaven knows we need help to live like that!

How do you respond when more is asked or expected or required of you than you believe you can handle? When parents with several children find out they are expecting twins: Do we have the emotional and financial resources needed to bring all our children up to be loved and loving human beings? When a spouse dies or betrays, or when I am diagnosed with a terrible illness: How do I have strength to go on? When the business fails and we can't afford to stay in our home any more: How will we live? When I have an opportunity to make a lot of money by acting unethically: What guides me in choosing my action?

Last week during the 11 a.m. service here, we baptized eight new Christians. As we do every time any person is baptized in this community, the rest of us renewed our own Baptism vows. We renewed those promises we make about how we will live our lives day to day, whether the day is humdrum or filled with crisis. Will you keep

coming to church? Will you keep resisting that which is not life-giving? When you stumble, or become a stumbling block to another, will you acknowledge that and turn back to God? Will you share God's love by what you say and how you act? Will you act in loving ways to your neighbor, even if you disagree or don't like him? Will you keep working for justice and peace in every situation in which you find yourself? Will you recognize that every human being, even one who intends you harm, is a beloved child of God?

Those are huge promises! Who could do this? To each of those questions, we answer, not unlike the disciples: I will, with God's help. I will, *with God's help*. Increase our faith.

Faith has many facets, and it's likely each of us has a different definition for "faith." But let's suppose that faith has something to do with God (by whatever name we use) working creatively, that is life-givingly, in the world . . . not just once upon a time, but right now, and into the future past our ability to imagine. God working in the world, and working through us, the people who go to church, and God working through people who don't go to church at all.

Maybe faith has something to do with recognizing the interrelationship of God and all creation, and trying as best we can to live in a loving, right relationship with God, with each other, and all God has created. Maybe whenever we try to do that, however imperfectly, our mustard seed of faith grows.

What happens when God increases our faith? How might we act? What might we have to do? This may fall into the "careful what you ask for" category. Things could get out of hand! Maybe things as impossible as a mulberry tree being uprooted and planted in the sea would happen. Like a wall dividing Berlin coming down. Like institutional racism being torn down, brick by brick. Like tens of thousands of loggerhead turtle eggs being painstakingly relocated this summer

from Alabama to eastern Florida by thousands of volunteers (in a specially outfitted FedEx truck no less), in an effort to save the turtles from the deadly oil poisoning the Gulf waters.

How does God increase our faith? Maybe one way is by expanding our hearts and minds, opening us to new understandings, new questions, new ways of being in the world, new ways of relating. Maybe God is increasing our faith whenever we find our souls nourished by whatever nourishes them—the beauty and mystery found in music, in worship in a place like this, by walking in the park, bicycling around this great city, watching the ocean. Maybe God is increasing our faith through the care and affection we share with any of God's creatures, human or otherwise.

Maybe God increases our faith through examples like Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and through St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day we observe today. Francis, patron saint of animals and the environment, felt it was the duty of all creatures, human and otherwise, to praise God, and that humans should protect and enjoy nature as both the stewards of God's creation and as creatures ourselves.

The transplanted baby loggerheads are making their way in a new ocean while faithful people of all kinds continue to clean up the Gulf. Those trees uprooted a year ago are still in Central Park, now in the form of mulch, protecting and nourishing their former neighbors. In the spaces where they once stood, newly planted young trees are now growing, lifting their branches to Brother Sun and Sister Moon. And we gather here this morning to praise God, to thank God, to bless "our brother and sister creatures," as St. Francis put it.

And we gather here to ask God to increase our faith. *Amen.*

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