

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

Living With Life Rather Than Against It

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 6, 2013
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 17:5-10*

I have been thinking about, wondering about, asking questions about faith all my life, and almost always wishing that I had more of it. One might assume that for a person in my business faith would come naturally and easily; another might conclude that people like me do what we do because we are always seeking what we lack. Probably each would be correct to some degree.

The disciples said to Jesus, "Increase our faith." Who of us has not whispered or shouted that prayer a thousand times? Sometimes we have said it when we were trying desperately to believe something we just didn't believe. Sometimes we have asked for more when we were facing a heartbreak that seemed unbearable with the puny amount of faith we had at the moment. At other times we have uttered it when we had no idea where else to turn or what else to say.

Jesus answered them this way: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." In a synoptic gospel Jesus made the claim that with faith the size of a mustard seed, a mountain could be moved. No matter how many times I read this passage, I always initially find his remark unhelpful and maybe even a little flip. Despite understanding the power of metaphor and hyperbole, I always want to ask, "Can you say a bit more about that?"

Faith for most of us is a big question, one of the biggest. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews neatly defines it: "Faith," he writes, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It is a beautiful verse, even suitable for framing. I guess it helps some, but questions linger. Precise answers to them have never come, but some of the best learning I have ever had around the issue of faith has come through stories of faith, and struggles with faith, in the lives of real people.

When I a young teenager, a friend, who was just a couple of years older than I, died very suddenly. One morning he left for school, suffered an aneurism before second period, and was dead by lunchtime. Everything was ordinary about the day until it wasn't, until the moment when everything changed forever. Now almost half a century later, I still think of his death and even more about his parents' reactions. I tell this story without a hint of judgment for I have never walked in their shoes and hope I never do. Like most people in our part of the South, his parents were religious, faithful people. Faithfulness was the water we drank, the air we breathed. My memory is that from the awful moment itself until the end of their lives, the mantra of his parents was "our faith will get us through this"; and when each time it seemed not to be quite enough, which was every time they tried to speak of it, one or the other and sometimes in unison, they'd say, "We just have to have more faith." Over the years the sadness of the tragic death of a young, smart, handsome guy was almost overshadowed by the sadness of his parents' attempting to deal with it. I often wondered if they would not have been better had they simply admitted their brokenness rather than insisting upon having greater and greater faith. I don't know and will never know how their faith truly helped them; it's not for me to know. I only know that their search for more faith appeared to me, a young man trying often futilely to make sense of life, to be mostly sad and empty.

Yesterday morning I had a long conversation with a good friend of mine who is an oncology chaplain at one of the country's leading hospitals for children. She told me a story of great contrast to the one I've just recounted to you; she spoke of a marvelous young girl, whom I shall call Beth. Diagnosed with a very aggressive malignant brain tumor about a year ago, Beth recently died. At a point during the year when it was obvious she was not going to survive, Beth's mom asked my friend, the chaplain, to talk with the two of them about dying. Swallowing hard because this never gets easy, my remarkable friend assumed this monumental task.

She encountered a girl, barely fourteen, who had the courage to ask the questions that needed to be asked—hard questions about the next life, questions all of us have that have no definitive answers. My intrepid friend answered them as best she could, lovingly and honestly. Beth also talked about her

feelings that she was letting her mom and her friends down by not being able to beat the disease. She spoke of her fear that she'd be forgotten, a reasonable fear perhaps, though one in this case beyond the realm of the possible for those who loved her. As only a teenage girl might be, she was proactive, taking some steps to make sure she was not forgotten. She asked her closest friends to embroider her name somewhere inside each of their wedding dresses. She told them that she would send sunbeams and butterflies and asked that they take care of her mother. And, oh yes, she instructed that at her wake, her girlfriends were to wear pink stilettos. My friend reports that six beautiful young women in their not-to-be-missed pink high heels were quite noticeable at the wake and that no one will ever forget the moment.

One of Beth's friends wondered why she had been denied the miracle of being cured. Another said that for her the real miracle was this last year of Beth's life, how it had changed all of them forever. Faith, perhaps as small as a mustard seed or maybe as big as all of life, living in the hearts of the very young: It was and is alive and well.

Though the disciples prayed for more, as have we, faith seems not to be something that works well in measurements, maybe not working well as a quantity at all. Perhaps that's why Jesus chose to speak of it in fairly ridiculous words—uprooting mulberry trees and transplanting them to the ocean and moving mountains hither and yon. He knew that it is about much more than something that can grow and be measured, something that can be accomplished through this discipline or that one. He told the strange story about the slave and the master to show that being faithful is not something we are to be proud of or thanked for, but something that just is. Faith gets complicated and even deadly when it depends for its life upon a particular outcome. Faith is faith whether that for which we are hoping comes to pass or not; when faith depends upon our getting our way, it is not faith but something else—bargaining, threatening, cajoling, not one of which I believe to be the domain of God.

For me, the truth is that sometimes we are more faithful; sometimes we are less so. In a strange way the longer I live the more I come to believe that faithful living is really just about living. It is about living in a way that moves and breathes **with** life rather than against it. Of course, we attempt—and rightly so—to affect positively the scope and direction of our lives, always seeking, I trust, to love more fully, to accomplish the goals we have set for ourselves, and to seek and find the relationships that will give us meaning and joy. But faith comes most dramatically when we encounter the inevitabilities of life that exist beyond our control, the happenstance of life, the way our genes line up (often, but not always, perfectly), the way our choices (sometimes brilliant, sometimes not) lead us to or away from relationships and opportunities, the life and death moments of those we love as well as our own such events. A unique aspect of our humanness, faith is the Divine connection that allows us to live through that which is beyond us, not glibly or without pain, but faithfully in the assurance that we are not alone and that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God.

Faith: It is there when we need it.

In the name of God: *Amen.*