The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, Virginia

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.
October 5, 2025

"Gotta have Faith"

"Increase my faith." As thick as the disciples can be at times, this one takes the cake. Jesus could do many things. He could heal the sick, raise the dead, calm the seas, cure the blind and lame, dumbfound the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes, just to name a few, but how is he supposed to increase someone's faith? Perhaps he could hypnotize them, or maybe just zap them and give them more faith, or create a pill when taken daily, could increase faith. He could call it vitamin F.

It feels to me that this request is absurd. Faith comes from within. We develop our faith through our experiences of the Holy. Scripture, spiritual reading, prayer, and worship are all components of developing and increasing our faith. It is not something that someone else does for us. Other people may contribute to the growth of our faith. Parents, grandparents, friends, ministers, Sunday School teachers, spiritual directors, and spiritual writers all can have a part to play. The teachings of Jesus, and his parables, miracles, and preaching, absolutely play an important part in the development of our faith. Jesus may be able to zap someone and suddenly they have more faith, but I do not think that is how faith or Jesus works.

Each week, I read numerous commentaries on the scriptures assigned for the week. In one of them, Debie Thomas noted that "Jesus responds to the request with bewildering impatience."[1] Additionally, Thomas writes, "I'm inclined to applaud [the disciples]. After all, their request is so earnest, so well-intentioned. They're not asking for wealth, comfort, prestige, or safety. They're asking for *faith.* Isn't that a good thing?" I do not dispute that their asking for faith is better than asking for the others. I just think it is a silly request. Jesus seems to think so too.

His response is to tell them that if they had faith no bigger than a mustard seed, they could do incredible things. They could even tell a tree to move itself to the sea, and it would happen. Clearly, they did not have that much faith, and neither do we. Even the greatest of saints did not have faith like Jesus describes. But I don't think that Jesus meant us to take that example literally. He was doing what he does so often by speaking in hyperbole. He is once again trying to get our attention with an extreme example. I think the other readings we heard this morning can clue us in on what Jesus means by faith.

The writer of Lamentations is in deep distress. The mere thought of his afflictions and homelessness is too much for him. He says they are like wormwood and gall. The herb wormwood is a metaphor for extreme bitterness throughout history. It is also toxic. Wormwood was an ingredient in the liqueur Absinthe and could prove fatal when drunk in copious amounts. Gall describes a bitter and toxic plant substance that could also dull pain. By combining these two substances, the psalmist describes a deeply bitter and deadly experience. It is so powerful that his spirit is bowed down at just the thought of his distress.

As often happens in the Psalms, the writer of Lamentations, who is sorely afflicted, proclaims how he is sustained and encouraged by his faith in the Lord. He is lifted up by God's steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. He gets through the dark night knowing that these are renewed every morning. His soul affirms this, saying that

[1] Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2384-if-you-have-faith accessed October 4, 2025.

the Lord is his portion, not the difficulty he currently experiences. What sustains him is his hope in the Lord and knowing that it is good to patiently wait on the Lord. Striving is not the solution to his troubles, but patience.

The Psalm we heard also comes from a place of despair and hopelessness. It begins, "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,/when we remembered you, O Zion." The psalmist is one of the Israelites that was taken into captivity in Babylon after Jerusalem was conquered in 586 BCE. The Jewish exiles sit on the banks of the Euphrates and lament their exile from their homeland. So distraught are they that they hang up their harps in the trees rather than try to play music.

Then comes a line that echoes across centuries, cultures, and exiles. "For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called for mirth: 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'" It is a cold, revolting, and demeaning request. Exiles, captives, and slaves across the millennia have been asked for a dance, a song, a poem, or a play not because their captors wanted to appreciate their art, but to ridicule the captives. It was also to remind them who is in charge. It is sadistic.

The exilic poet pushes back, saying that he cannot sing Zion's songs in a foreign land. Indeed, he would rather lose all his skill to play music and be unable to sing than play a song for his captors. But his tongue still works as he curses Babylon and Edom, the ones who shouted with joy as the Lord's Temple was ransacked and destroyed. He curses Babylon, predicting its destruction and predicting happiness for those who see Babylon fall. He even curses the children of Babylon. An uncomfortable image, but one we can well understand given their captivity and the pain they have experienced in exile.

The verses from Lamentations and Psalm 137 show a person and a people in great distress. The individual suffers from an unnamed affliction and homelessness. His situation is doubly bitter. Yet through his faith in God, he holds onto hope that this will pass and in the proverbial morning, God's steadfast love and mercy will relieve him of his anguish. After seeing their holy city destroyed and God's home plundered and razed to the ground, the Israelites who were taken captive into Babylon, bewailed their circumstances and the cruelty of their captors. But they do not only exist in that moment. Through their faith in God, they know the day will come when they will be freed.

The disciples wanted to have their faith increased by Jesus. They only had to look to their scriptures to find examples of their own people who lived in dire straits, had not lost their faith but had held onto it and even increased it. Increasing it is essential. Faith is active, not static. We are called to grow in faith beyond that tiny mustard seed.

We also have choices as we grow. We can take good experiences and see God's glory in it or foolishly take them as our due and blithely go on our way. We can experience bad and even dire situations and choose to abandon God because we feel God has abandoned us. Or we can look forward with a heart of faith, knowing that God is with us. I do not believe folly and faithlessness are the answer. A faith that grows even in the face of adversity is our hope. Grow your faith; do not expect someone to do it for you. It will do more for you than wealth, comfort, prestige, or safety. Our need for more faith is one thing that the disciples got right.