

## **Growing in Faith Together Stewardship Series**

**“Increase Our Faith!”**

**Luke 17:5-10, 2 Timothy 1:1-14**

**October 2, 2022**

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I'm sure that the biggest thing on all of our minds this past week was the hurricane which thankfully passed by this part of Florida without too much consequence. We're very aware at this point that we are in the midst of hurricane season, but while you were all watching the storm trackers and weather updates last week, there was a letter that went out to the members of LPC announcing the arrival of a different season. It was a letter from our Stewardship Ministry announcing that Stewardship season has arrived. It's that time of year when we are asked to support the mission and ministry of LPC by making a financial commitment. As I said in my newsletter article, we talk about stewardship at this time of year for practical reasons- because we need to come up with a budget for the next year – but from a spiritual point of view, it's always stewardship season because stewardship is an ongoing part of our Christian discipleship. We are always called to respond to God's goodness and grace with gratitude and always called to be good stewards of all of the gifts we have received from God. Making a financial pledge to the church is just one way that we practice being good stewards of the gift that this church is to us.

Our Stewardship Ministry has chosen a theme for this year's emphasis that reminds us that having a place like LPC to grow in faith together truly is a gift. That's the theme- Growing in Faith Together – and the first letters of those words spell the word “gift.” When we participate in church life, we do lots of things together. We worship, and serve, and pray, and learn and the growing in faith together happens through and in the midst of doing all of those things. In our sermon series for the next few weeks, we are going to narrow in on the subject of faith in particular. We are and we want to be growing in faith so what does that mean? What does growing in faith look like in our lives? How does it happen? Each week we'll be looking and listening for what God has to say to us about it by looking first at a passage from the Gospel of Luke, and along with the Gospel passage, we'll be listening to a passage from Paul's second letter to his protégé, Timothy.

The passages from Luke come out of chapters 17 and 18 which are part of a larger section that spans from Luke 9 to 19. This section is sometimes referred to as ‘the travel narrative’ because in these chapters Jesus is making his way toward Jerusalem where he knows it isn't going to go well for him. On the way, he teaches about the kingdom of God and has several confrontations with the Pharisees. 2 Timothy is the second letter that Paul wrote to Timothy from prison. He is not expecting to be released and anticipates that he will likely be executed, so he is communicating all of the last and important things that he wants to say to this young pastor that he had mentored. Throughout the letter he urges Timothy to hold on to his faith and stick to his ministry no matter what. I'll read first from Luke 17:5-10, and then the opening of Paul's letter to Timothy, reading chapter 1:1-14.

### **Luke 17:5-10**

<sup>5</sup>The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” <sup>6</sup>The Lord replied, “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.

<sup>7</sup>“Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table?’ <sup>8</sup>Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare

supper for me; put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? <sup>9</sup> Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? <sup>10</sup> So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'

## **2 Timothy 1:1-14**

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to God—whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. <sup>4</sup> Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. <sup>5</sup> I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. <sup>6</sup> For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands, <sup>7</sup> for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

<sup>8</sup> Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, in the power of God, <sup>9</sup> who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace, and this grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, <sup>10</sup> but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. <sup>11</sup> For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, <sup>12</sup> and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard the deposit I have entrusted to him. <sup>13</sup> Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>14</sup> Guard the good deposit entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

In the Gospel passage, we hear the disciples saying to Jesus, “increase our faith!” and maybe that’s a request that you have made yourself at some time or another. Luke doesn’t provide any insight into why the disciples wanted Jesus to increase their faith, but maybe they were feeling the kinds of things that you and I feel when we pray and ask the same thing. If I had more faith, maybe I would have less fear about obeying Jesus when obedience involves taking a risk, or becoming uncomfortable. If I had more faith maybe I would feel less fear about facing the threat of a storm, or an illness, or some other kind of loss. If I had more faith, maybe I would be closer to being the kind of person and Christian that I want to be and that I think God wants me to be. If I had more faith, maybe I could do something remarkable like pray for a person’s healing and they would be healed, or I could tell others about Jesus and they would become believers, or we could ask God to fill our church with new members and that prayer would be answered. Maybe Timothy, as a young pastor who aspired to be like his mentor Paul and who wanted to do a good job and be an effective leader had also prayed this kind of prayer. Lord, increase my faith!

The desire for bigger, stronger, increased faith seems like a good desire if our reason for wanting more faith is because we want to be more faithful to God who is faithful to us, but when the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith, his answer suggests that they don’t necessarily need more or bigger faith. In fact, he tells them that it only takes a very small amount of faith- faith the size of a mustard seed - to achieve that which seems impossible whether that’s asking for something big in prayer, or facing something fearful, or obeying Jesus when it’s costly. The point is that it isn’t the size or amount of a person’s faith that is important. What matters is whether a person has any faith at all. This is really good news for those times when our faith feels as small as or even smaller than a mustard seed. We can be encouraged with the good news that our faith in God- whether we judge it to be big or small or strong or weak- our faith in God, if we have it at all, is enough to carry us through life. It’s enough to help us succeed

in following and obeying Jesus. It's enough to give us strength in difficult times, and it's enough to bring us all the way into the arms of Jesus who will be there to welcome us home at the end of our journey.

Jesus's answer to the disciples was good news for them and for us – if you have faith at all, it's enough- and with that good news we are relieved of the challenge of having to try to muster up a greater quantity of faith, and yet there is still a challenge when it comes to faith because faith has to be activated. If we don't activate our faith, then we don't feel and experience it's power in our lives. It's faith that is activated that moves the mulberry tree into the sea. If you have even the tiniest amount of faith, Jesus said, then *you can say to the tree*. The faith that is there motivates and inspires us to tell the tree to move. Without faith we wouldn't think of telling the tree to do that, so we need the faith, but we have to act because of the faith that is there. We might think about it like having access to a gym. I know this is not a perfect analogy, but I think you'll get the point. If you have access to a gym that has some kind equipment in it, then you have what you need to be able to achieve your fitness goals. It doesn't matter if the gym that is available to you is a garage gym that has a few dumb bells and a jump rope or whether you have a membership at a high-end gym with machines, and a pool, and exercise classes. It's possible to get in shape and build up your strength in either gym, but if you never set foot in either the garage or the fitness club, you aren't going to get in shape. You need the gym to get in shape, but if you don't use it, you won't get the results. The same is true with faith. We can have it, but if we never exercise and activate our faith we won't see or experience what can be accomplished in our lives through faith.

During stewardship season, as we think about our church and the hopes and dreams we may have for our church – the our ministries would grow; that more people would come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior through our outreach; that our ministries of mercy and justice would bring hope to the hurting and contribute to making our community more like the kingdom of God; that our relationships with each other and with God would deepen – as we think about these things that we would like to see God doing through our church, those things may seem like big challenges given the way things are in the world today. Denominations are shrinking and people are less interested in denominational affiliations and many aren't interested in any kind of spiritual affiliation. During the pandemic many people stopped attending church completely or at least stopped attending in person. Families are busy and church activities have been deprioritized behind all of the other options. You know what the challenges are and maintaining a vibrant ministry and congregational life may seem to be an even more impossible task than telling a mulberry tree to uproot itself and go plant itself in the sea. There may be times when we feel like we just don't have faith that is big enough to meet the challenges in our day.

Timothy was facing challenges as a church leader in his own day. It's possible that Paul knew that he was feeling discouraged which is why he celebrated Timothy's faith and then gently reminded him to fan into flame his gifts for ministry. Paul was encouraging Timothy activate his faith by using his gifts and by faithfully proclaiming the gospel, and I think that this is God's word for us today. Whatever faith we have is enough. God can do incredible things in and through us now and for years to come with the faith that lives in us, but we have to let ourselves be moved to action by our faith. If we act on our faith, we can give generously to support our existing ministries and give birth to new ones. By faith we can invite friends and acquaintances to come to our church where they can hear the gospel proclaimed and feel the warmth of Christian community. Our faith can motivate us to pray and ask God to bless our ministry and give us success in carrying on Jesus's ministry.

Sometimes it might feel like having faith at all is the hard part, and maybe it is. It can be hard to believe in what we haven't seen and in God whose existence we can't prove with empirical evidence, but faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. If we have that mysterious

assurance, what I think is often the harder part is actually letting that faith determine our actions and direct the course of our lives. It's making the pledge when you're worried about your finances, or forgiving someone when you want to hold a grudge, or saying yes to helping with a ministry when you aren't sure you'll be good at it. Activating faith can be hard, but we don't have to do it in our own strength. Jesus gives us the grace and the strength and the courage to follow him, and this morning, he makes himself and his grace available to us in a special way through the Sacrament. As we come to his table, we may think about those opportunities that have been and are being presented to us to exercise our faith with faithful action, and today we may make a different request than the one the disciples made. Instead of asking Jesus to increase our faith, we may ask him to increase our faithfulness for our own good, for the good of our church, and for the glory of God. Amen.