

“Increase Our Faith”

Luke 17:5-10

7 October 2007

The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor
Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church

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The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” 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. “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’? 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’? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 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!’”

Prayer.

At age 24, a young man from Annandale, Virginia, by the name of Chris McCandless¹ went searching for more.

He was a recent graduate of Emory University who gave away his life savings to Oxfam, and began a sojourn across America. He stopped for short periods to work. Mostly he attempted to live off the land, using as little equipment as possible and with little or no human contact. He dreamed of an Alaskan Odyssey, where he could be far from civilization, and where he would keep a journal to describe his physical and spiritual progress.

Despite the protest of many others, he hitchhiked to Alaska in February 1992 and entered the wilderness on the Stampede Trail near Denali National Park, taking with him nothing more than a 10 pound bag of rice, a .22 rifle with plenty of ammunition, a book of plant life, and some camping equipment.

Eight months later, hunters found the body of Chris McCandless, in a sleeping bag, in an abandoned bus, next to his camera and journal which contained 113 separate entries. He had died of starvation. Chris McCandless wanted to embrace the Alaska Wilderness. Instead, he died in its arms.

Though he has left behind a cultural legacy of want-a-bees, authors, screen writers, and television producers, Chris had been foolish, naive, and it unnecessarily cost him his life.

More is better pushed McCandless to the edge, and tossed him over. He is no different than those who play extreme sports or who live on the periphery; bungee jumping, sky diving, extreme skiing, motorcycle jumping, computer gaming, second life living.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_McCandless

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We Americans have embraced the “more is better” mentality whole-heartedly and without reservation. An open market and free trade is all about maximizing production, increasing profits, and providing ever-growing returns for investors. Production and consumption is just about killing us.

Credit card debt has never been larger. In August of this year, the overall increase of credit card debt reached 12.2 billion dollars; that is an increase in only one month! The total debt now stands at \$2.47 trillion.²

When it comes to personal gratification, we want it bigger, faster, and we want it yesterday. We are so focused on our little world of work and family, that we fail to realize that half the world, nearly three billion people, live on less than two dollars a day.³

“How is that?” We ask. I fill my car with \$30 worth of gas every other day. World poverty is almost so bad as to be unbelievable. And if it is unbelievable, we don’t do anything about it.

In the year 2000, if we had taken 1% of all the weapons purchased, and spent it on education, we could have educated every child on the planet, and still had money left over.⁴ Drugs and alcohol may be the opiate of the people, but weapons and prisons are the opiates of governments, and profits and returns are the opiates of business.

When it comes to our career path, we also create the assumption that more is better. We seek advanced degrees, hoping that it will give us a leg up in the job market. We assume that everyone needs to climb the corporate ladder, and we wonder what is wrong with those who don’t. Everyone expects a soldier to improve in rank, and when they don’t, well, they are usher back to civilian life. Why? Because, it is just the way it is, we justify to ourselves.

When it comes to spiritually we want more, too. Bigger is better, we assume. Bigger churches, mega churches, auditorium sized sanctuaries, multi-media productions, more programs, bringing in more seekers, winning more souls for Christ.

It is as if we say, “Super-size me for Jesus!”

The world is filled with laity and preachers of this mentality. I believe the list of pastors from Western New York who expressed an interest in running for bishop was about two pages long, when it was first circulated at last year’s annual conference. Every year there is a scramble for bigger parishes, with taller steeples (more prestige), and with bigger salaries.

We think that we need more and more mountain-top experiences to sustain us. We look to retreats, prayer or healing services, Bible studies, and other similar strategies. If we aren’t

² <http://www.marketwatch.com/news/story/us-consumer-credit-rises-59/story.aspx?guid=%7B68E0E9B6-9CFB-4192-8188-C601EDB2DAA2%7D>

³ <http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp>

⁴ Ibid.

getting mountain-top experiences with the current preacher, we believe, maybe we need a new one. If we aren't getting them with the church we are currently attending, maybe we need to look for some place different.

If we look at our life-long trajectory of faith development, we make the assumption that size matters. We want to grow long, never pausing to reflect upon the possibility of growing deep. Please me, satisfy me, make me pure, make me believe.

Even when it comes to Holy Communion, we believe more is better. "Why do you give such a little piece of bread? That's not going to fill me." Or, "just a drop of juice on the bread? What is that? It makes for swill in the cup and it isn't nearly enough to satisfy my thirst." "I want my own loaf, thank you, and, I want my own glass, and, I want it served to me on a platter."

"I can afford it. Why can't I have it?" we whine.

In our gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus' disciples are asking for more. "Increase our faith!" they exclaim. Just wouldn't you love to have them for employees; they are always seeking new ways of self-improvement.

Increase our faith is what appears to be a perfectly noble request. But it is met with Jesus who boldly proclaims, the faith you have is sufficient. You don't need any more. It isn't an issue of obtaining more; the point is what are you doing with the faith you already have?

The world tells us that more is better; but Jesus is telling us just the opposite. More isn't better. We've already been given sufficient faith. "What are you doing with the faith you have?" he is asking us this morning.

Will you develop your mustard seed size of faith? Or will you allow it to dry up and blow away?

Just as a slave or a hired hand shouldn't expect recognition for simply doing their job, so too should we adjust our expectations. Jesus expects us to use our God given talents for God's good purposes. And, we should do so thankfully, joyfully, and without the expectation of anything further. This is the heart of faithful living. This is the heart of finding a rhythm with God; a pattern, a lifestyle lived in harmony with our Lord.

Sufficiency is a hard concept for most of us to grasp. It is the belief that God has supplied us with sufficient faith, sufficient resources, sufficient means to complete his will and call for our lives. Not more, mind you, rather it is all about developing what we already have.

The intersection of the world's demand for more and Christ's expectation to develop that which we have already been given can be a messy one. Some of us might be called communists or socialists, which is, of course, completely untrue. Some might think we've gone off the deep end. It doesn't matter what other people think. What does matter is, what does our Lord think?

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Jesus tells us that he is satisfied when we put to use the sufficient faith we've been given. This is the sign that one has successfully transitioned from living in this world to living in God's kingdom.

So, my beloved, I see that the challenge of the gospel for us today is for us to pause, reflect, and take a moment for self-examination. And what better place than before the Communion table.

In the kingdom of God the rules are somewhat different than in our society. Values and beliefs are much more important, they play a more prominent role. Living a life rooted in faith, the faith we've been given, is sufficient; it is our source of energy, the source of living water. It is the foundation upon which grace and love and forgiveness and salvation are built.

The question is "in whose world will we live?"

Keeping one foot in each world places us in the messy intersection, littered with all the wrecks of organized religion, wild west type movements, charismatic false prophets, and the latest, greatest new age fad.

Both feet in the world tells us that we want more. More is better. More is everything. More keeps us running like the gerbil in the round, spinning cage.

But living with both feet firmly planted in God's heavenly kingdom, giving our whole, our all, for Jesus Christ, using the faith supplied, gives our Lord great satisfaction. And shouldn't that be our goal?

In whose world will you live?

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