***HAVE A LITTLE FAITH!***

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Texts: 2 Timothy 1:1-14 and Luke 17:5-6

How much faith do you have? Henri Nouwen tells of going to a circus in Germany and being amazed by the trapeze artists: the Flying Rodleighs. He was so impressed that he called and met them, and they became friends. From time to time Nouwen traveled around Germany just to see their performances! He describes a conversation he had with the leader, the ‘Flyer Rodleigh’, who explained how they fly through the air:

*“As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I am the star, but the real star is my catcher.” “How does it work?” Nouwen asked. “The secret,” Rodleigh said, “is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing I can do is to try to catch the catcher. A flyer must fly and a catcher must catch and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms that the catcher will be there for him.”*[[1]](#endnote-1)

George Plimpton described something similar in his brief journalistic experience as the flyer with the Flying Apollos trapeze act. The hardest part, he says, is letting go and trusting that high above the ground in midair the catcher will be there with arms outstretched to make the catch. All you have to do is let go of the trapeze; just let go and trust that he’ll be there! Could you trust that much, if not on a trapeze then in some other aspects of your life? Do you have that kind of faith, that kind of absolute trust in anyone or anything or any god?

In his book *What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Jewishness of Jesus*, Rabbi Evan Moffic writes:

*For Judaism and for Jesus, faith is not believing in certain things. It is, rather, about believing in* ***someone****. It is about trusting in a relationship.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

The One in whom we believe is the God who created us, loves us without end, and promises to be with us always; the God who came to us in Jesus in order to save us and to reestablish right relationship with us. We broke the relationship, so God sent Jesus to repair it. “Believe in God, believe also in me,” says Jesus. “Trust in God; trust also in me. With your life, with your hopes, with your future – in the midst of fear and despair, even in the face of death – trust in God and in me!” Can you do that, not just on Sunday morning, but day to day? How much faith do you have, my brothers and sisters?

The disciples Jesus was sending out into the world as apostles to carry on his mission and ministry didn’t believe that the faith they had was enough. They had faith, but they felt it was ***little*** faith, inadequate to carry out ***big*** responsibilities. They didn’t feel up to the task Jesus had given them as ambassadors for his good news! What daunted them was not just the obstacles that lay ahead in a world that might not be receptive to their message – and might be openly hostile to it. Those were daunting enough! But they also had to confront obstacles that lay within them; for they struggled to live in that way Jesus had taught them and showed them. He asked that they love, not only their friends, but also their neighbors and enemies. He told them to forgive, not just once, but as many times as forgiveness was sought. He demanded that they turn the other cheek and minister among the outcasts of society and speak truth to power, even when it was dangerous. It was hard enough to ***preach*** that message, let alone ***live*** it! The tasks seemed too great for the little faith they had, so they pleaded with Jesus for something more: “Increase our faith!”

Perhaps those very words or thoughts or prayers have crossed your mind or escaped your lips from time to time, “Lord, increase my faith! Give me more to work with – greater assurance, greater trust, greater faith with which to face the challenges that lie ahead.” They are words often spoken by those preparing to serve as elders for the first time. They are prayers lifted by men and women receiving a diagnosis of some dreaded disease and whispered again as they begin treatment. They are the pleas of all those who face some new peril or temptation that will test their relationship with God and their trust in God’s promises. Like Popeye in the cartoons of old, we want God to pop open the can of faith and pour it down our throats to give us strength sufficient to face what daunts us or overwhelms us, for we are fearful that we cannot do alone with what little faith we have whatever it is we are called to do. And that fear can paralyze us.

In his book, *United*, Senator Cory Booker shares a quote from his father that he says has shaped his life in response to such fears. His father told him, “[F]ear cuts off possibilities, faith expands them; fear locks doors, faith opens them; fear hides, but faith takes risks.”[[3]](#endnote-3) We who are followers of Jesus are called to shed our fear and embrace our faith, to trust that God’s promises for us are true, enabling us to do what we cannot, could not, would not do alone. *With God all things are possible*, says the angel Gabriel to Mary – all things! Paul echoes that sentiment when he writes, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*!” Why then are we so convinced that we can do so little? Is it because we fear that our faith is too little and that little faith can only do little things? Or is it because we are afraid we will be asked to do something big?

“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could do great things,” says Jesus. “You could tell a mulberry bush to go jump into the sea and it would. You could move a mountain with just a little faith.” A mustard seed is not much more than a tiny yellow dot! Faith the size of a mustard seed is just a little faith. It is not leap-over-tall-buildings-in-a-single-bound kind of faith. It is not stare-down-the-devil-in-his-tracks kind of faith. It is not the faith of martyrs or the great saints of history. Mustard seed faith is just a little faith, but it is faith enough to do great things. It is faith enough to overcome fear in these turbulent times. It is not a lot of faith, but it is enough. *If you had a little faith, you could do great things*, says Jesus.

Truth be told, we don’t want to do great things. Most of us just want to do small things – good things, but small things. “Let someone else do the great things, I’ll settle for just a good thing or two, Lord. Don’t make me a martyr or a saint or a prophet or a preacher, just make me a plain, simple Christian. My faith isn’t great enough to do great things. I have a little faith to do little things.” To which Jesus replies, “*With a little faith you can do great things.*” Not little things, not just good things, but **great** things!

The good news of the Gospel is that you are far more powerful than you imagine. You have far greater possibilities for how God can use you, more than you think possible. You have Potential with a capital P in God’s good book, and all it takes on your part is a little faith. Ernie Campbell claims that no one should bother asking for volunteers in the church because people just don’t know what they are capable of doing.[[4]](#endnote-4) Or maybe we just don’t want to admit the possibilities. It is easier and safer to profess a little faith and expect little of ourselves in return. Except that Jesus says you can do **great things** with a little faith. You can do **great** **things**, because God can do **great things** through you.

Paul emphasizes that same message in his letter to Timothy, urging him: “*Rekindle the gift of God that is within you…for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*” It is that same spirit God has given to each of us. It is the spirit with which the early church withstood persecution in order to spread the Gospel across the world and across the ages, so that we might gather here today with millions of Christians around the world to break bread and share a cup in remembrance of our risen Lord. Nineteen hundred years ago, with the church growing on the fringes of society in the hands of a group of itinerant preachers who were persecuted at every turn, who would have thought that the Christian faith would grow as it has? They began with just a little faith, but they did great things, because God worked through them

A little faith may not seem like much, but in the hands of God a little faith can indeed do great things – with us, through us, and when necessary, despite us! As theologian Cynthia Rigby says: “*A little bit of faith goes a long way toward contributing to the healing of a world that often seems impossibly broken.*”[[5]](#endnote-5) That pretty well describes the world in which we live these days – impossibly broken – and the healing, if it is to happen, requires faith in all sizes – some big and some little, for with God all things are possible, even the healing of this impossibly broken world, even the healing of our impossibly broken nation, even the healing of our impossibly broken lives, even the healing of our impossibly broken souls. Just a little faith is enough, says the Lord. Just have a little faith! Amen

1. Henri Nowen, *Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring*, HarperSanFrancisco: San Francisco, 1994, pp.66-67 quoted by Joseph Harvard, III in “Preaching the 2010 Easter Texts, *Journal for Preachers: Easter 2010*, Vol XXXIII, No.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Rabbi Evan Moffic, What Every Christian Needs to Know About the Jewishness of Jesus*, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2015, p.104 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cary Booker, Cory Booker’s father, quoted by Cory Booker, *United*, Ballantine Books: New York, 2016, p.25 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ernest T. Campbell quoted in *The Midweek Reminder*, Center Presbyterian Church, Slippery Rock, PA, April 5, 1995 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cynthia Rigby, *Holding Faith*, Abingdon Press:2018, p.xxxiii [↑](#endnote-ref-5)