

Faith that God Can Use

Melanie was a high school student who dreamed of a career in graphic design. She was good at drawing and especially loved the challenge of creating images for new fashion clothing. Yet, at the same time, she was worried and apprehensive that she'd never get into the right school to learn the skills she needed in this field. She agonized over the many other people she thought had more talent and better preparation than her.

One day the school counsellor took her aside with some encouragement, "You already have what it takes to succeed: a natural gift for sketching and design, great ideas, lots of energy and enthusiasm. You have to believe that the opportunities will be there. Then just walk through the open doors and seize the moment!" And that's what Melanie did. She got into a prestigious design school and graduated with honors, landing a job as an associate in fashion development within a short time. The key was believing that she already had what was needed to fulfil her dream.

In a sense that's what Jesus told the disciples when they asked about faith. He'd just presented them with a list of seemingly impossible behaviors expected of them: don't be the agent that causes another to sin; help others face their sins and turn from them; be willing to forgive sins any number of times (Luke 17:1-4). No wonder our gospel text starts off with "the apostles said to the Lord, 'Show us how to increase our faith.'" (v.5) They thought that these expectations of Jesus required them to have enormous faith on their part – and they were well aware of how little they had.

How does Jesus respond? Does he lay his hands on them and pray that they be given more faith? Does he snap his fingers and grant them a double dose of his Spirit? Does he give them such vast faith that they would be able to remove all obstacles that got in their way? No,

because all of this would focus attention on them, not on the real source of power. “The Lord answered, ‘If you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘May you be uprooted and thrown into the sea,’ and it would obey you.!” (Luke 17:6) The point Jesus was making is that they already had the faith they needed; even a faith the size of a tiny mustard seed is enough as far as God is concerned. That’s because the size of our faith isn’t the issue – it’s God who’s doing the acting.

If it’s my faith that moves mountains, then I’d need bigger and bigger faith to do it. The bigger the obstacle, the more strength I’d need to climb it. The more serious the illness, the greater the faith I’d need to overcome it. The more serious the sin, the more faith I’d need in order to have it forgiven. That kind of thinking makes sense to our human minds, but that’s not how faith works. God is the one doing the work through faith.

Think of faith as the key that opens the door to God acting in our lives. If I have a bigger key ring than you do, does it matter? No, the size of a key ring doesn’t matter because key rings don’t open doors. It’s that little key on the ring that opens doors. The same with faith - even a little faith opens the door for God to move the mountains and trees in our lives. So, what Jesus is saying to his disciples is that even the smallest faith can grasp what God has done and is doing in our lives. Even the smallest faith is able to recognize the ways that God is able to make changes in our world through us.

A small congregation built a new church on a piece of land donated by a church member. Ten days before the new church was to open, the local building inspector informed the pastor that unless the number of parking spaces doubled, they wouldn’t be able to use the new church. But in order to make more parking spaces, they’d have to move a rocky hill behind the property.

Undisturbed, the pastor announced that next Sunday morning he would hold a prayer session asking God to remove the “mountain” from the back yard and to provide enough money to have it paved before the scheduled opening dedication service.

At the appointed time, 24 of the congregation’s 300 members assembled for prayer. They prayed for nearly three hours. The pastor concluded the session with the assurance that next Sunday the church would be opened as scheduled. “God has never let us down before. God will be faithful this time, too.”

The next morning as the pastor was working in his study, there was a loud knock on his door. A no-nonsense-looking construction foreman entered. “Excuse me, Reverend. I’m from a construction company building a big shopping mall. We need a lot of fill for the project. Would you be willing to sell us that rocky hill out behind your church? We’ll pay you for the dirt we remove and pave all the exposed area free of charge. We need to do this now to allow it to settle properly.” So the church was dedicated the next Sunday as originally planned.

The pastor and the 24 people with him weren’t superheroes of faith, nor was the time they spent in prayer any indication of what would come next. What did matter was their understanding that “Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.” (Hebrews 11:1) Jesus didn’t need to increase the size of the faith of his disciples. They already had faith, although small, God still accomplished great things through them: they shared the Good News about Jesus even in the face of strong opposition, some being brought before rulers and judges, imprisoned and killed; the apostle Paul’s many difficulties he suffered was possible because of his strong belief “For I can do

everything through Christ, who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:13). Paul never talked about how great his faith in God was, rather about what his faith was focused on.

Jesus concludes his teaching with the Parable of the Unappreciated Servant to emphasize the point that it’s God who does whatever work we do through us. Regardless of the amount of accomplishment we think we’ve done, it’ll never be enough to warrant God’s attention. Our relationship is based on grace, not on a debt God owes us for all our good works. “When a servant comes in from plowing or taking care of sheep, does his master say, ‘Come in and eat with me? No, he says, ‘Prepare my meal, put on your apron, and serve me while I eat. Then you can eat later.’ (Luke 17:7-8)

Jesus modeled the kind of ministry he calls us to, bringing a new way of dealing with people based on the desire to do whatever it takes to serve and make others’ lives better. There are no restrictions on the kind or amount of effort, no need for having to be constantly shown gratitude for every action taken. “And does the master thank the servant for doing what he was told to do? Of course not. In the same way, when you obey me you should say, ‘We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.’ (Luke 17:9-10) Unlike the Parable of the Watchful Servant (Matthew 12:35-40), this lesson calls believers to focus on serving Jesus today rather than on inheriting a spiritual reward at the end of time.

Author and pastor Tony Campolo, an engaging and passionate motivational presenter, stepped off the plane in Honolulu, Hawaii for a speaking tour. Because of the eight-hour time difference from his home on the mainland, he went to an all-night diner and ordered a cup of coffee from a waiter named Gus. He hadn’t been there very long when a small group of women came in and sat down in a neighboring booth. One of them, Rachael, spoke about her upcoming

milestone 30th birthday, and wondered how she'd celebrate it. The women left without any definite plans for the event. Gus informed Tony that these were hospital shift workers who came to his diner every night at the same time. They weren't the most highly paid employees of the health district, which would account for the lack of plans for a celebration of the woman's birthday. Tony had an idea.

The next evening just before midnight, he came to the diner with streamers and balloons and in a few minutes had a festive atmosphere set up. Gus baked a birthday cake and decorated it with candles and the number '30'. When the women arrived, Gus and Tony sang 'Happy Birthday' to a speechless Rachael who exclaimed in tears, "I'd never guess anything like this would happen!" A very appreciate group left the diner having experienced the creative and compassionate effort of one who lived Jesus' instructions to do whatever it takes to serve and care for others' needs.

No wonder the apostle Paul encouraged Timothy with these words, "For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. By the appearing of Christ Jesus, our Savior, he broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News. Hold on to the pattern of wholesome teaching you learned from me – a pattern shaped by the faith and love that you have in Christ Jesus. Through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us, carefully guard the precious truth that has been entrusted to you." (2 Timothy 1:9-10, 13-14) We have the opportunity to fulfill the two-fold mission of the church: to care and be cared for by other believers, and to reach out to the world as Jesus' hands and feet. It takes a servant's humility, a parent's compassion, and a child's faith. May the One working within us fulfill all that we are meant to be. Amen.