

*For we walk by faith, not by sight.* (2 Corinthians 5:7) Faith is the basis of all that we are about as Christians. After all, it's no accident that we call it the Christian faith and not the Christian religion. While many of us often use the words *belief* and *faith* interchangeably, they are not the same. Belief has to do with agreeing that something is or is not true. We believe the earth is round, though I venture not many of us have ever been in a spaceship to take a look at it. However, others have seen it, and we base our belief on what they've told us and the pictures they've shown us. We trust what they have to say. And that trust is closer to the meaning of faith than what we believe to be true. In other words, trust is what turns belief into faith. Perhaps the best word for faith is reliance. If we trust something, if we have faith in it, we rely on it. We believe a lot of things but we only have faith in them when we rely on them.

Many of us say we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and we accept him as our Lord and Saviour. We only prove this when we live like it. We take Jesus' teachings to heart. We rely on them to show us the way. We rely on his guidance to help us live in this world. We rely on his grace to do our part in seeing that God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

We can see this message in our gospel from Mark. It's one of those places where Mark likes to group Jesus' teachings in pairs. The first part of the pair is called the Parable of the Growing Seed and the second is the Parable of the Mustard Seed. While these parables are different, they are also similar. Both parables talk about the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus' life and ministry especially to those who have the ability to see it — to those who have eyes of faith.

The Parable of the Growing Seed stresses the mysterious nature of God's realm. The seed grows mysteriously during the night. The farmer sows the seed but then the process of growth begins, imperceptibly. It's like the greening of grass in the spring after a long winter of cold weather. Gradually the transformation takes place. There comes the day when we notice it — when we have eyes to see it. And to our eyes it may seem as if it just happened over night. One day the lawn was brown and dormant and the next it is lush and green. It takes place mysteriously, the way corn grows from the seed itself. "... first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head" (Mark 4:28 NRSV). In secret, God quietly oversees the mysterious process of growth.

Our faith is like that. There are times when we may think we are losing our faith, when actually, we are moving to a deeper level. What appears on the surface as disorder and confusion and even disintegration, can actually be the mysterious process of growth pushing us to another stage on the way to a mature faith. If we had God's eye-view, we might be less concerned. In truth, growth is never easy — especially spiritual growth. A wise priest friend once put it this way: "Faith is like the label on a bottle of medicine: Shake well before using." The way to a deeper faith is to give up the level of faith we have. Another way to say this is "to trust the process." But it takes eyes of faith to see this.

The second parable about the mustard seed makes a similar but different claim. It tells us that faith is not only a mysterious process of growth, but at any given moment, the faith we have may be able to do more than we think it can. How much faith do we need? Not very much it seems. Just as much (or as little) as a mustard seed.

The mustard seed Jesus is talking about is the black mustard seed. It was planted and cultivated for use as a spice. Sometimes the seeds were ground into a powder and the oil from them reserved for

other purposes. The mustard plant could grow upward to ten feet. Yet the mustard seed itself was one of the smallest known at the time. The point is that the size of the seed is small in comparison to the mature plant. Or spiritually, a little bit of faith can make a big difference. It can go a long way.

Jesus meant this parable as a word of encouragement. That is the way most of us take it when we hear it. It's a comfort to know that we don't have to have much faith. If we only have faith the size of a mustard seed that's all we need. In other words, how much faith do we need? Not very much. Just a little of the right kind. Perhaps Jesus is speaking about "genuine faith" as opposed to a false or fake faith. A person with genuine faith is able to affect things in a way that often exceeds our greatest expectations. But a false faith? Could it be that Jesus knew there are times when we try to fake it? Rather than search deeper into our own minds and hearts for the right response, we resort to canned clichés. When the moment of truth presents itself, we fall back into the same old things we've always said and done. Brilliant public speakers, even dedicated Christian ones, have been known to quake in their boots when asked to pray publicly. They instantly resort to a childhood prayer they once learned by rote or pick up on topical events rather than plumb the depths for what their adult soul might be wishing to say. It's the difference between an "inherited faith" and an "owned faith." An inherited faith is the faith we received from our parents and grandparents. It was their faith and we learned it from them. For them it was genuine. But for us, times have changed. We have moved on. Yet our faith has not. We're still stuck with their faith. The only thing wrong with that kind of faith is that it's not our own.

It's possible to move from an inherited faith to an owned faith but there's a period of time in between that may look like a lack of faith. Disinherited faith or disowned faith is what we might call it. It's the way most people move from the faith of their fathers and mothers to one of their own. The problem is that some people seem to get stuck in the in-between stage.

That's what many parents of children are afraid of. They're afraid that when their sons and daughters go off to University they will lose the faith they once had. The truth is, they may. The other part of the truth is, they may need to so they can find one of their own — one that suits them and works for them. They need something that can sustain them through life, just as our faith has sustained us. There are also those of course, who retire or reject their ancestral faith, or reduce it to some glib philosophy, a moral compass, but who hang on with a sentimentality towards the good outworking of the faith, but at heart reject the core teachings of the Church. I come across many people like this at their parents or grandparents funeral, at weddings and even baptisms, in our schools and institutions—sometimes at the very top tier of their management and governance. As a member of the Diocesan Schools Commission with ten years service and having served on three school boards, I am telling you this is quite common. Many of our principalships and school boards are full of extremely competent and skilled people, but do not have an active faith, and in more cases that you would think are much more interested in the business model than the Christian ethos of the school. An Anglican school principal who will remain nameless confided in me in the past that at a board meeting, board members refused to say a prayer at the beginning of the meeting as they were not comfortable in doing so.

Two thoughts came to mind when I heard this confirmation of what I knew was common: Firstly, how on earth can our Anglican schools teach the Christian faith when the the top tier of leadership doesn't really believe in it? And secondly, is it no wonder that our church nationally is in decline and our schools have turned into multi- million dollar businesses using our name but holding loosely at best to the faith. But I digress—So how much faith is enough? A little, but of the right kind — the genuine kind.

When you have this kind of faith it's amazing what can happen. Even extraordinary things can take place. It's often difficult to find just the right example to give witness to this occurrence. What may appear amazing to one person may just be a matter of fact for another and vice versa. The time when most of us seem to look for this is when we are in need of healing, especially physical healing. There are those times when we pray for someone to get well and when they don't, we jump to conclusions.

We feel the reason must be that our prayers weren't strong enough. In a word, we feel that we didn't have enough faith. We forget that the point in Jesus' parable is not how much faith but what kind. We also forget that not everyone is supposed to get well every time. When Jesus was on this earth, he did not heal every person alive at the time. We need to be very careful when we get down on ourselves for not having enough faith because that may or may not be the case.

There is something else as well. Sometimes God does seem to take our little faith and work mighty miracles with it. It just doesn't have to be in these life-or-death matters. It happens every time someone takes on a job in the church they think they can't possibly handle, and lo and behold, they become a master at it. Or when we let go of a role in the church to allow someone else to have a go and find we were not so indispensable anyway. When I was in high school, the last thing I ever imagined myself being able to do was to stand up and speak in front of people. When I was a Prefect in high school, I received the Headmaster's Most Outstanding Student Award. However, I was so speechless that all I could get out was, "Thank you." It was the shortest acceptance speech they'd ever heard. It probably made them wonder if they had made the right choice. I know it did me. After more than thirty years of preaching Sunday in and Sunday out, my problem is not what to say, but what to leave out.

Think of this: People have found that they can take care of others when they never dreamed they could. My father was a man's man. When I grew up, he was always tinkering on a motor or electrical item when he wasn't working down in the shed. I never saw him do one thing domestic around the house except maybe the vacuum cleaning occasionally and light the fires. This is the same man I watched take care of my mother for almost thirty years, who had a heart condition. I don't know if he thought he could do it or not but as a family I think if we are honest we were genuinely amazed. My mother came to rely on him and so did we all. That's another reason I believe that reliance is another word for faith.

So I ask once more. How much faith is enough? Just a little. Just as long as it's genuine and as long as it's yours. Yes, Jesus got it right, the size of a mustard seed. One day, when you least expect it, the strength of your own faith may surprise even you — like the blossom of a beautiful but hardy daisy after a long winter nap. That's when you will know you too have eyes of faith. Amen.

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