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Pentecost Proper 22C
Peace, Seattle
October 3, 2010 epk
Luke 17:5-10

EXERCISE YOUR FAITH

When I answered the phone there was joy the other end of the line:
"IT'S A GIRL," he said, "AND WE'RE GOING TO NAME HER MATIA!"

This was Donna & Mark's third child, and after a difficult pregnancy, they were glad the delivery was over. They had decided to name their new daughter Matia; using my daughter Megan's middle name.

When the congratulating was over, Mark shifted gears, then he told me the rest of the story.

Matia was born with her right arm below the elbow missing. Somehow during the pregnancy the umbilical cord had wrapped around her, amputating a portion of her arm. Other than the missing arm, Matia was perfect.

But it was clear that her parents' minds were racing ahead, imagining what her life was going to be like; imagining how family and friends would react; wondering what her peers would think.
And most importantly, wondering how Matia herself come to terms with this reality.

In today's loosely packed grab bag of teachings from Jesus, I'd like to focus on verse 5 of Luke's gospel:

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."

Increase our faith! I can identify with that plea.
God knows that we all could use a bigger dose of faith active in our lives.

Confronted with the impossible challenges of walking the way of Jesus and talking the talk of Jesus, we can find ourselves wondering if the clay jars of our lives are adequate containers for the work we've been called to do. **I mean listen to the job description:**

- Feed the hungry,
- House the homeless,
- Welcome the stranger,
- Love the enemy,
- Cherish your partner,
- Bless your children,
- Forgive with abandon,
- Make peace with those who hate you,
- Act ethically in the workplace,
- Share generously from your assets…

NOT TO MENTION…

- Volunteering in the schools, eating low on the food chain, reducing your carbon footprint, becoming a locavore, taking a wage cut at work, and cleaning up the Gulf & Puget Sound!

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Measured against such incredibly high standards, is it any wonder that our voices join with the apostles to cry: INCREASE OUR FAITH!

How does Jesus respond to our plea?
Let's dig into the language of this exchange between Jesus and the apostles for a moment.

When the disciples plea—"INCREASE OUR FAITH!" The verb is PROSTHEUO.
PROSTHEUO is the same root word from which we get our word PROSTHETIC.

The disciples, it seems, are asking Jesus: LORD, GIVE US A PROSTHESIS FOR OUR FAITH.
In other words, something to prop us up, another limb to shore up our balance, a crutch.

It seems like a proper request. But notice how Jesus answers.
The disciples say, "PROP UP OUR FAITH."
And Jesus responds, "NO, EXERCISE THE FAITH YOU HAVE."

A little lesson in Greek grammar.
There are two "if" clauses in Greek: those which express **a condition contrary to fact:**
(1) If I were you (and I'm not...)
And those which express a **condition according to fact:**
(2) If Jesus is Lord (and he is...)

The conditional clause in verse 6 is of this second type, so we could translate his response this way:
IF YOU HAD FAITH THE SIZE OF A MUSTARD SEED (and you do), YOU COULD SAY TO THIS MULBERRY TREE, 'BE UPROOTED AND PLANTED IN THE SEA,' AND IT WOULD OBEY YOU.

HOW DOES THIS CHANGE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT JESUS IS SAYING?
Jesus' response is not a reprimand for absence of faith, but an affirmation of the faith they have and an invitation to exercise the full possibilities of that faith.

It's kind of like what you learned in biology: we only use a fraction of our mental capacities, our gray matter. So it is, Jesus says, with our faith.
YOU'RE USING THE TINIEST FRACTION OF WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN YOU—AND YOU WANT MORE? EXERCISE THE FAITH YOU ALREADY HAVE!

Well, what might exercising our faith look like at this point in our life together?
Let me propose three things.

(1) First, exercising our faith means engaging our imaginations.

Posed as a question, we might say: How can we continue to cultivate an atmosphere here in which imaginative thinking about engaging the folks beyond our doors is affirmed and encouraged?

In the last two issues of Peace Notes you've read about the connecting that's happened recently between some Peace folk and the kids who live in the **Longfellow & Westwood Courts** cooperatives.

A couple years ago a grant from our congregation helped create a mural celebrating the diversity and unity of that place. Now we're received a new invitation to make connections and cultivate relationships that will serve them as well as us. WHY NOT GO THERE?

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Our October newsletter tells of another opportunity for public engagement as we serve as hosts on October 26th for a community wide dialogue on public trust sponsored by Seattle City Club.
[Jenn Ramirez Robson will be telling us more about that during our announcement time.]

In an age where the rhetoric from churches often comes across as narrow and judgmental, we have the opportunity to develop a reputation as a church that welcomes careful conversation on topics effecting not only ourselves but all the citizens of this city in which we live.

In the coming year we'll be revisiting the VISION STATEMENT we affirmed in 2007, looking with fresh eyes at what God is calling us to be and do in the next 5 years. There are many new faces and voices that have become part of Peace in the last five years; and I, for one, am eager for those conversations as we discern together where and how the Spirit of God will lead us next. It's all part of exercising our imaginations.

(2) Secondly, exercising our faith means exercising our spiritual lives.

When you want to become physically fit you eat right and exercise regularly.
When you want to strengthen your heart, you bike or walk or take a class at the "Y".

When you want to build spiritual strength, you come to worship, dine at the Lord's Table, engage God's word, and cultivate your prayer life, incorporating Christian practices into your weekly rhythm.

Some of you are aware that over the past nine months a group of us have been developing a new process of apprenticeship in the faith at Peace. We call it **A Journey of Faith**.

It's small group experience focused on growing in our understanding of God's call to us in Jesus—a call that is filtered through the events and experiences of our individual lives, a call to meet him at the Font to have our lives reshaped by his promises and presence.

Everywhere people are struggling with what will bring meaning to their lives, what they can count on and put their trust in, when the economy tanks, when health goes south, when sparks start to fly.
The world is full of vendors who claim they have the solution that'll make our lives whole.

But we know better. In baptism our lives are centered around the One who chose not to stay at a distance, but instead to empty himself, becoming one of us, and giving himself willingly on the cross so that we could trade dead ends for abundant futures. Jesus Christ is the real thing.

Let's exercise our spiritual lives together, and so build up our faith.

(3) Finally, exercising our faith means being a community of forgiveness.

In the verses just before today's gospel, Jesus tells the Twelve that the work of forgiveness is never over. Forgiving each other isn't something we can check off our list and be done with.
It's an every day calling. Between ourselves and our partners and family, and also between one another in this community of faith.

But let's be clear here, exercising faith doesn't mean avoiding conflict.

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Disagreements have always been part of the life of the church. It's how we deal with conflict that matters.

In our second lesson Paul writes to Timothy, who is deeply discouraged.
Maybe he's been chewed up in the parish. Maybe he's lost confidence in his call.

Paul knows that "feeling sorry for him" is not what he needs. So Paul pulls out the matches and tells Timothy, "its time to rekindle the gift of God in you; to exercise your faith."

Exercising faith means living out of that spirit Paul talks about: not a spirit of cowardice but a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.

When we practice forgiveness with each other we will find the life of our community deepened, and enlivened and filled with new possibilities.

Increase our faith?! Lord, may we exercise the faith you've given us, by engaging our imaginations, exercising our spiritual lives, and becoming a community of forgiveness.

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When our little friend Matia was born, her Dad sat down with his son Isaac, to explain that his new little sister was missing an arm.

It didn't take long for young Isaac to get the picture.
Soon he was down on his knees, alongside his Dad.

What were they doing? They were seeing if they could tie their shoes with one hand.

Instead of dwelling on the limitations she would face, they focused on the solutions;
instead of impediments, they were caught up in possibilities.

They were exercising their faith.

Let us go and do likewise. Amen.