

*Piece by Piece*

Lam 3:19-26, Lk 17:5-10

We say she is a woman of great faith. In spite of the frustrating conditions with which she lives, she perseveres in prayer thanking God throughout the day for giving her life. She quietly recognizes that God has a plan for her right where she is. She's lonely without her friends and pet. She's simply mindful of heirlooms she's neither touched nor seen in months. She is a 95 year-old woman who never complains nor seems to be down. She sits in her rocking chair at an assisted living facility, staring out at the flowering shrubs planted just high enough to see through the window and prays that God will help her to stay focused on God's great kingdom to come ... because throughout her lifetime of faith, she knows that that is all that matters.

We visit a woman of such faith and we wish that ours could be so strong. A faith that's so strong might give us a certainty in our lives like she's been able to attain. A faith that's as strong as hers might just be the key for *us* to reach a level of peace in *our* hearts that will enable us to sit quietly beside whatever tree we're trying to move and know that it's all going to be ok. A faith that's as strong as hers just might help us get some sleep. And so we ask her to pray thinking that maybe through her prayer, some of her faith will rub off onto us --- if we're positioned just so. Maybe through her prayer, God will reveal to us the key to understanding this great mystery of life. Faith. Maybe through her prayer we will be granted an increase in our own faith as if faith were a Lego toy, growing piece by piece so long as we connect the right raised dots.

You know, it could be just a matter of age. We meet so many faith-filled people who are wonderfully old. Could it be that faith accumulates through the years to bring us to a point where we can sustain "anything at all with God's help?" When we've gone through as many trials as anyone who's 95 or so, surely we'll have great faith indeed. Yes, it could just be a matter of age.

This way of thinking suits us because while we want to have faith, we don't seem to have the time to work out how to get it. Actually, since faith is a gift from God, we shouldn't *have* to, right? Work at it, I mean. And so we come to believe that we have what we need for now and what more is required will somehow appear (in a hocus pocus kind of way) when we need it most.

So we go on about our days accepting what we understand to be the faith that God has given us and nod lovingly at those people of great faith who allow us to sit nearby and benefit from whatever outpouring of faith they're willing to offer that day. Yes, in time, we reason, we'll have great faith, too.

And then a bomb drops. For most of us, it's a figurative bomb like a layoff from work, or a car crash, or a horrible illness or disfiguration, or a relative moving in or a relative moving on. For others, it's a real, live bomb of the sort that's killed or maimed so many people this last week alone in the fighting in Afghanistan and Palestine and Somalia. It's a bomb that crashes upon us and requires us to dig deep. Because that's where our faith is buried. Deep. It's not as readily available as we'd like, is it? Lord, help us all. Why can't we feel a certainty and peace now in this moment we need it most? You know, like that woman of great faith we visited only a week ago?

Several questions begin to surface as we wade through the rubble of our lives. How am I going to make it through? Will God help? Is there a God? If I only had faith! What does faith feel like, anyway, and how would I know? Only to be reminded from the deep recesses of our memory that faith is a gift from God, given to each one of us. Now, where's that gift when we need it? It seems to be wrapped so carefully that it's concealed! Is it in such a small package that we can't even see it? Maybe it's so little that it won't help us through. With just one more prayer, maybe we'll find that it's as great as we need. It's just been stuffed into a very small package that will burst open once we figure out a way to open it up. I wonder if there's a certain tool required to get at this gift once and for all? Yes, maybe there's a trick to opening it up right now...

And then somehow we realize that it's going to be all right once we trust God to give to us what we can't get or do for ourselves – like recognizing or opening a gift called faith. Which we have. In droves. Luke believes it and we should, too.

As I wrote for our October Pres Notes, it all comes down to what we believe to be true. And what we believe to be true - and then what we come to believe about *ourselves* - is grounded in the messages we play over and over to ourselves each day, creating the script that becomes deeply seated in each of us. We play this script for the rest of our lives so that, in effect, it becomes our life story unless it is interrupted by a trusted and persistent voice as the chapters of our life unfold.

A theory I studied in the early '90s found that everything we've ever been exposed to is sitting in our brains. The study poses that all ideas, information and experiences we've encountered are set in categories like atoms connected in molecular structures. Every *single* thing we need to know is sitting right there, available somewhere in our brains. All we need to do is find it. All we need to do is find the right structure in which it's been stored, then mentally sort through that structure to get to the precise information, experience or ideas we need to help us maneuver a parallel encounter to the one we're facing.

In other words, if we need to know something about soccer, we would access the sports molecule, if you will. If we need to figure out if a certain price will enable a product to break even, we would access our quantitative globule. If we wonder if pursuing a potential friendship is appropriate, we would access our relationship globule. Ultimately, if we need to figure out if we have faith, we would access our "confidence in God" globule I suppose.

If we believe that God has given each of us a gift of faith – whether we feel like our faith is the size of a mustard seed or the size of an avocado pit – we can access it, we can rely upon it, we can use it to see us through. We don't need to worry until we're 95 years old to have great faith. We don't need to go through extraordinary life experiences to have great faith. We don't need to sit close to someone with great faith and hope it will rub off. We only need to embrace the faith that we already have to know we can suffer any bomb dropped on us or on the world; we will be able to move whole forests more than a single tree.

Are you and I telling ourselves day after day that we lack faith, that our faith is weak or that our faith insufficient? Do you and I compare our perceptions of others' faith and tell ourselves that ours will never be so strong? Can you and I allow an interruption to this message such that we begin to access our faith – begin to rely on our faith – begin to go into our Faith globule - on such a regular basis that the message we come lean upon is that our faith is reliable and true?

Perhaps, then, the question we could be asking is not, "Do we have faith?" or "Is our faith great enough" but, "Why aren't I allowing myself to believe that I have the faith that God

has given me?" Responding to that question becomes our daily task so that we begin to adjust our personal script to tell ourselves every day that God has given us faith that can work miracles. In other words, there should be no *question* remaining of IF we have faith. The only question that stands is, "Where is our faith and how can we apply it today?"

A man wrote, "Before joining a prayer group at work, I hadn't thought much about what role my faith should play in the office. In fact, it was the one area of my life in which I hadn't deliberately engaged my faith. It wasn't that I had intentionally checked my faith at the door; I was just so focused on my work that it never occurred to me that I could share it in the office.

"Since joining a prayer group, I am reminded to begin each day thinking about my faith and how I can allow it to influence my projects and my relationships with my project team. I also occasionally turn to my office prayer partners when I have a special concern or need advice. It's good to know their help and encouragement are just an e-mail away. During hallway chats, we share our office successes and failures and we challenge each other to keep the faith in the workplace, even under the most difficult circumstances."

He continued, "A prayer group member says that he likes to think of himself as a "secret agent" for God. He begins each day by greeting the Lord and "reporting for duty" - faith in hand, ready to tackle whatever God has in mind. With faith as his guide, his office prayer group become the hands, feet and heart of Christ, bringing his care, wisdom and perspective into every corner of their work world. With faith as their guide, they never wonder if God has blessed them sufficiently *with* faith. They simply call upon their faith to lead them through."

I would hope that each one of us would see himself as the wise old man people someday want to visit for an increase of faith. I would hope that each of us would willingly pray with someone who is feeling less certain about the faith that God has instilled inside of him because then we can help each other discover the truth that most of the time, what we think we need the most is something we already have. Amen.