

“A mustard seed of faith”, a sermon based on Luke 17: 1-10 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 2 October 2016 by Kerry Enright.

A woman wrote this letter to her spiritual confidant - “Jesus has a very special love for you. [But] as for me—The silence and the emptiness is so great—that I look and do not see,—Listen and do not hear.

Letters she wrote reveal that for the last fifty years of her life, she struggled to feel the presence of God, “in her heart or in worship.” In more than 40 letters this woman bemoans the “dryness,” “darkness,” “loneliness” and “torture” she is undergoing. She compares the experience to hell and at one point says it has driven her to doubt the existence of heaven and of God.

After making a speech, she said to an advisor: “I spoke as if my very heart was in love with God – tender, personal love.” “If you were [there], you would have said, ‘What hypocrisy.’” She wrote this of her relationship with God ...

“I call, I cling, I want ... and there is no One to answer ... no One on Whom I can cling ... no, No One. Alone ... Where is my Faith ... even deep down right in there is nothing but emptiness & darkness ... My God ... how painful is this unknown pain ... I have no Faith ... I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart ... & make me suffer untold agony.

“So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them ... because of the blasphemy ... If there be God ... please forgive me ... When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul. I am told God loves me ... and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.”

A person it seems who struggled to muster a mustard seed of faith. Yet, earlier this year she was beatified. Earlier this year, she was made a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

The woman was Mother Teresa who in her life uprooted mulberry trees and planted them in the sea.

⁵The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” ⁶The 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.

Mother Teresa. When we act from what we believe, small as it is, who knows what happens. Yet we seem obsessed by what we do not believe, especially in New Zealand.

“Increase our faith!”

No, said Jesus, live from the faith you have. We do not live from the faith we do not have.

A friend of mine recently attended a church. After the service, people spoke to her and they were determined to tell her that the imagery in the service was only metaphor, and it was important she understood that. She felt as if they were determined to ensure she knew that they did not believe this and they did not believe that. She wants to go back to find out what they do believe in.

Is it helpful for us to be regarded as protestants, as if we define ourselves by what we are against? Is it helpful for us to be regarded as atheists, as if we define ourselves by what we don't believe in? And is it because we do not want to be regarded as being like “those people”?

I remember a comment I read once – “believe as little as possible”. Yes – as little as possible. Believe as little as possible, yet enough to make some sense of this incredible and mysterious world.

Believe as little as possible, yet enough to encounter this man Jesus who revealed much about who we are and what we are like and what is going on around us.

Believe as little as possible, yet enough to deal with the power of humankind to harm and flourish, to curse and bless.

Believe as little as possible, yet enough to cherish creation and love enemies and seek justice.

Believe as little as possible, yet enough to stop humans acting as if they are god.

World Communion Sunday is a Sunday for celebrating the belief we share, not what we deny. It started in Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh in 1933, perhaps because there was so much that was life-denying at the time, in the midst of the Great Depression, at the beginning of the rise of fascism.

What is the nature of a mustard seed faith? It's something we do, something towards which we live, to which we are oriented, into which we lean.

Jesus praises those who seek him out. "Your faith has saved you," he tells the woman who anoints his feet, the Samaritan leper who returns to thank him, the haemorrhaging woman who grasps his cloak. "Your faith has made you well," he tells a blind beggar. "Such faith I have not seen in all of Israel!" he exclaims about a Roman centurion.

The only thing they do is turn to him, shift direction, trust him ... and that seems enough.

Even in difficult, painful, and risky circumstances, even when we don't think we have enough faith or courage or love— to lean into his goodness, healing, justice, and mercy.

You have enough faith, he says. It isn't about size or proportion or greatness.

You have seen a glimmer of light and you are living from what you have seen, from what you have seen of me, and that is enough.

The life of faith is as straightforward as a slave serving his master dinner; as ordinary as a hired worker fulfilling the terms of his contract. Faith isn't fireworks.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that we waste a great deal of time and energy looking for the "key to the treasure box of More." All we lack, she argues, "is the willingness to imagine that we already have everything we need. The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are."

Do faith, said Jesus — and faith will happen. Do faith, and the astonishing fruit of faith will appear.

Wendell Berry's poem ...

Having written some pages in favour of Jesus,
I receive a solemn communication crediting me
with the possession of a "theology" by which
I acquire the strange dignity of being wrong
forever or forever right. Have I gauged exactly
enough the weights of sins? Have I found
too much of the Hereafter in the Here? Or
the other way around? Have I found too much
pleasure, too much beauty and goodness, in this
our unreturning world? O Lord, please forgive
any smidgen of such distinctions I may
have still in my mind. I meant to leave them

all behind a long time ago. If I'm a theologian
 I am one to the extent I have learned to duck
 when the small, haughty doctrines fly overhead,
 dropping their loads of whitewash at random
 on the faces of those who look toward Heaven.
 Look down, look down, and save your soul
 by honest dirt, that receives with a lordly
 indifference this off-fall of the air. Christmas
 night and Easter morning are this soil's only laws.
 The depth and volume of the waters of baptism,
 the true taxonomy of sins, the field marks
 of those most surely saved, God's own only true
 interpretation of the Scripture: these would be
 causes of eternal amusement, could we forget
 how we have hated one another, how vilified
 and hurt and killed one another, bloodying
 the world, by means of such questions, wrongly
 asked, never to be rightly answered, but asked and
 wrongly answered, hour after hour, day after day,
 year after year — such is my belief — in Hell.

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