

Habakkuk 1: 1-4; 2: 1-4  
Psalm 37: 1-9  
Luke 17: 1-6

An Increase of Faith  
October 6, 2013 - World Communion Sunday  
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Sometimes I think that what seems to be a non-sequitur in the Gospel stories is actually a joke on the part of the Gospel writer. Jesus gives his disciples some pretty demanding teachings: about the responsibility for making someone else “stumble,” or about forgiving frequently and repeatedly, or one might say, chronically. For once, Jesus’ friends seem to have understood the magnitude of what was being asked of them, and they are stunned into pleading “Increase our faith!” In other words, “Help! There is no way we could possibly do this, as we are now.” Jesus then gives the rather oblique reassurance: “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed” - only *this* big – “you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea’ and it would obey you.” I can imagine the disciples scratching their heads and saying, “What? Why would we try to plant that tree in the sea? Weren’t we just talking about forgiveness?” Meanwhile, the Gospel writer is chuckling away, lovingly amused at the consternation of the disciples.

These few verses have something to say to us modern day disciples about faith, and about what faith makes possible. Those worried disciples were asking how they could have what it takes to keep forgiving. They knew that “faith” – in the sense of “trust” – would be needed, but they did not know how to go about getting it. Jesus seems to be saying, “Start small. Trust as much as you can, for today. You will be amazed at what you can accomplish.” Apparently, faith is beyond measurement: it is about an attitude of trust, rather than ability or capacity.

Today, on many church calendars, is World Communion Sunday. We celebrate, with our brothers and sisters around the world, the sacrament of communion. In some places it will be called “The Lord’s Supper”, in others it will be called “The Eucharist”, in others it will be called “The Love Feast” or the “Agape Meal.” Just as varied as the names for the sacrament will be the means by which it is taken: whether people come forward or remain in pews; whether they eat wafers or cubes of bread or rip from a common loaf; whether they drink wine or grape juice. I remember attending a Greek Orthodox service in which the bread and the wine were mixed in a chalice and fed to the congregants with a spoon. Some may take communion as part of a full meal, or in a parish hall or a school or a home – or in a hut or a tent or a clearing in the woods. And then there is the understanding of communion. Some people celebrating this sacrament today will regard the elements (after the words of consecration are said) as being fully and actually the body and blood of Christ. Other will see the sacrament as a memorial, and think of Christ as being **spiritually** present, but not **physically** present in the bread and the juice - or wine. Others honestly don’t know what they think.

So there will be thousands of differences, some profound, some small, in how Christians around the world experience and view the sacrament. Many will think that only their way of doing it is the proper way. Some will welcome and serve only those persons who have made a profession of faith in that particular domination and in that local community. Others will welcome anyone, including young children, to the table. At the Greek Orthodox Church I mentioned, a baby was fed the mixed elements with a spoon just like everyone else.

There will be thousands of differences in practice and understanding today, but one thing is held in common: we all think that what we are doing is important, so important that we might even risk arguing over it. In fact we **have** argued over the practice of communion, in this church! We might even think of others' practices and teachings as stumbling blocks, or millstones, or just downright superstitious or heretical.

What could be a meaningful communion with each other and the churches of the world when we have such a wide variety of practice and belief? What could we have in common, that could outweigh our differences – not only in worship, but in biblical interpretation and social issues? Like those disciples long ago, I am stumped by the enormity of this dilemma.

I read this quote recently in a chapter of a book – Ministry in an Oral Culture – by Tex Sample. He quotes someone as saying:

*“What is common in community is not shared values or common understanding so much as the fact that members of a community are engaged in the same argument... in which alternative strategies, misunderstandings, conflicting goals and values are thrashed out.”*

OK. This is something, with just a mustard seed of trust, something that I can begin to wrap my head around. In this community, here at the Norwich Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, and in the community of the Windsor-Orange Association, and the Vermont Conference of UCC, and our denomination, and with other Christians around the world, we are united by the fact that we are all engaged in the same argument. Maybe you wish that I could offer you something more comfortable! But wait, we have something really basic here. We view ourselves as followers of Christ, and are trying to structure our lives in some way in response to his teachings and his calling. What joins us in community is not that we agree with each other in all things, but our belief that the discussions and arguments we can have are of importance. And, I might add for myself, that **how** we have them is important.

In some ways, we should expect differences of opinion about right and wrong and goodness and truth, since we call ourselves God's children, sisters and brothers of some kind. Think about your own families of origin or the family you have built as an adult. Do you all agree perfectly on every issue? Of course not. There are passionate disagreements about what is best for the group and the individual. But, so often, we manage to sit down at a table together and share food. Some might relish one dish and refuse another. Sometimes we have to do a little extra preparation – for instance, to prepare a gluten free option (as we do here for communion, by the way). Rarely is there a family gathering where no food is served. In fact, the feast often becomes the focus, where both love and affection and resentments and regrets are all brought to that messy table. And still we ask God to bless the meal, to bless the hands that prepared it, in trust that blessing is possible even amid the human frailty. And so the meal becomes a means of grace: a way for God to enter in and do what we cannot do alone.

Maybe some of you have stories of redemptive meals, with families or with others. I have one. For years, one of my sisters was estranged from the rest of us. We almost never spoke, and she avoided our calls and notes. Then one year, another sister made a mistake and dialed her number, thinking she was calling me. A reasonable conversation ensued. So when I heard about it, I thought, what if I invited all my sisters to Thanksgiving dinner with me and my daughter? And everyone said yes! I was a little apprehensive, but my formerly estranged sister arrived with birthday presents for

everyone – even for the one whose birthday was 5 months earlier. We feasted. We talked. We laughed. Did we agree about everything that had been done in the past, or that might be done in the future? No. I know for sure that we disagree about a lot of things. But, when I used my miniscule mustard seed of trust to make the invitation, grace entered in and filled the room. It was a true Eucharist: a thanksgiving meal, a time of healing and joy.

On this World Communion Sunday, think about your needs for reconciliation: with family members, with friends, with enemies. Allow the seed of trust to be planted, allow the small bit of bread and the small sip of juice to be a redemptive meal. Allow the small gesture to be the beginning of a journey.

On this World Communion Sunday, I will not ignore the differences between churches. Neither do I fool myself that a single invitation or a single discussion or a single meal will heal all wounds. With those disciples, I pray, “Increase my faith” so that I will have the stamina it takes to forgive over and over and reach out over and over and learn over and over. I will sing songs that come from another tradition. I will eat food that was prepared with love, even when it is unfamiliar. I will listen and I will speak. Because that’s what trust looks like, in small increments, like a mustard seed.

On this World Communion Sunday, I will celebrate the sacrament with faith, hope and love. Faith that God can work miracles with the raw material of our lives; hope that in communion meals all around the world, people are praying that God’s will be done; and love for the One who leads me into the light. Amen.