

Yr. C, Proper 22
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Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
Christ Episcopal Church
1585 Words

Lessons: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 37:1-10
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

My wife and I had a disagreement. After the death of our pure bred Corgi back in 2006, she wanted another corgi. I did not. I admit that I had been enticed initially by this breed known for great intelligence. But 13 years with conniving, little Isabelle persuaded me that intelligence is not everything.

“I don’t care how dumb our next dog is,” I said, “as long as he’s sweet! We should get a Golden Retriever—you know, friendly, beautiful, *and sweet!*”

Our three daughters were as divided over this question as Kim and I were—Corgi or Golden; convenient, compact size or large; brilliant or friendly?

Today, our lessons are all about faith, and the ways in which faith informs our decisions and our lives—with regard to matters big and small. What is faith, after all? Is it believing or trusting in something or someone without a doubt?

Mother Teresa of Calcutta was one of the 20th century’s heroes in faith. And then she revealed how she had lived with a surprising amount of doubt.

But wait, we’re inclined to think of doubt as the opposite of faith. Not so fast...remember what Jesus said...on the cross? He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Hmmm. Maybe genuine faith includes some room for doubt.

I mean, consider the prophet, Habakkuk. This morning he sounds like someone in the midst of a faith *crisis*. “Lord, how long must I cry for help and you will not listen?”

Do we have enough faith to pray to God with that kind of honesty?

Habakkuk continues, “I cry out about all the violence, and you do not stop it. I point out all the injustices, and you seem to just let it happen.” Our prophet sounds like he’s throwing his hands up. It’s not just disappointment he feels toward God; it’s despair.

Is your faith big enough to make room for disappointment and despair?

Our oldest daughter, Katherine, took her parents’ irreconcilable differences about dog breeds, and she did what a normal, middle school kid would do back in 2006. She typed it into Google: “Corgi plus Golden Retriever.”

I knew Kim was right. A large Golden Retriever would never fit into our crowded vehicle with three kids when we went to the grandparents’ house for the weekend. And Kim knew I was right. We absolutely needed a dog who would stop snacking on our furniture, and not pick fights with bigger dogs every time we walked around the block. We needed a small calm, collected kind of dog in our lives.

The Psalmist gives us a calm, collected song this morning. “Do not fret yourself,” he sings to anxious people like us. “Put your trust in the LORD and do good.” Oh, but there are other songs in his repertoire that are filled with anger and angst. Like the time he sang, “How long, O LORD, will you forget me *forever?*” (Psalm 13)

So, is one Psalm more faithful than another? Or is there a faithful place for all of these different expressions—joy and sadness, comfort and despair, thankfulness and frustration?

Is your faith big enough to make room for all of these conflicting experiences?

“I have found our next dog!” Katherine shouted from the computer in our den.

“Stop being ridiculous,” I replied. “We are not going to get some dog you have found on the World Wide Web!” There was no telling what Katherine thought she had found *or how far away it was!*

Children just don’t seem to see the kinds of limits that we reasonable adults can see. Is that why Jesus commended the faith of...*children* and *not adults*...when he made a comparison between us? For Jesus plainly told the adults, “Unless *you* become like *children*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Is your faith big enough to make room for that kind of hopefulness and wonder...and maybe even ridiculousness?

St. Paul writes a sweet letter to young Timothy, with words full of grace and peace. Many modern people mistakenly think of St. Paul as a sort of ‘relentless Terrier’ or even a ‘Pit Bull,’ defending the faith. But a closer read of his letters reveals a lot of ‘Golden Retriever-type’ sweetness and affection.

“I long to see you,” Paul writes, “so that I may be filled with joy. I remember the faith of your grandma and your mom. This same faith lives in you!”

It’s *like*...a gift...that keeps on giving year after year, life after life, from generation to generation. The promise of God is that the grace of Jesus Christ has been given to us, so we have this remarkable power to live without shame or fear. We are blessed with strength to persevere through the power of love.

Is your faith big enough to make room for that much promise?

Bethune, S.C.—in all my South Carolina life, I had never heard of a place called Bethune. But Google had, and if the search engine was right there was a mutt living with about 75 other mutts at a woman’s house in Bethune. Her heart for animals was bigger than her wallet.

I arrived at the house. Dogs were *everywhere* inside her large, fenced, yard of sand. It was not great for those dogs, but still better than the alternative. There, in the corner of the fence, was the dog my daughter found on the internet—timid, afraid, dirty, and no match for all the other dogs vying for attention. He was a cross between a Corgi and a Golden—the compact size we needed; and (I hoped) the sweet disposition we longed for!

I put him in the passenger seat, and spoke gently to him all the way back to Columbia. When I arrived home, I took him out of the car, laid him in the lush green grass of our front yard. *And I am not making this up*...he rolled over on his back, stuck all four of his stubby little legs into the air, and fell in love with our family *immediately*.

Is your faith big enough to make room for that much gratitude and trust?

The apostles must have felt as ill-equipped as we do for the work that lies before us. “Increase our faith!” they demanded of Jesus. We use gentler words than they did...like the hymn we sang last Sunday at the 10:30 liturgy: “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days...” God of grace and God of glory, please increase our faith! We *need it*...and we need it *now!*

Is our faith big enough for the living of these days? Is our faith big enough for us to reject our fears about not being in control? Is our faith big enough for us to reject our deep desire for certainty?

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus has the answer, and it is NOT what we were expecting!

Jesus takes my question—Is our faith big enough?—and he turns it upside down. Instead of promoting a 'big enough faith' for us disciples, Jesus commends to us a 'small enough faith.' Jesus says it will be okay if we have faith as tiny as a mustard seed.

In other words, this is a faith that *anyone* can hold. This is a faith that *anyone* can handle. Literally, anyone can plant a tiny mustard seed. Anyone can nurture a tiny, little mustard seed. And anyone can see—in time—that God is perfectly capable of transforming the tiniest little seeds into miraculously, new, abundant, and fruitful life.

What if Jesus was not actually insulting his disciples by saying, "If you had the faith of a mustard seed..."? What if he was simply making a wonderful promise about the power of *his faith*...in us?

Listen, y'all. Faith is a free gift, not an achievement. It does not start out in its perfect, final form. Faith includes doubt, and even despair. It is full of promise, while embracing the whole gamut of life experience. Therefore, it is not reasonable. Instead, faith is hopeful and wonder-filled, *like little children or little dogs*. Faith is the kind of deep trust, borne of an even deeper gratitude for love.

And the Good News is that the tiniest amount of *this kind of faith* is powerful enough and good enough and beautiful enough to get you through your day...your week...and your life! The tiniest bit of faith in the eternal, expansive love of God—*it's enough!*

So, take your little mustard seed, and plant it. Now you've got to nurture it, *like any seed*. So, don't neglect your faith. But don't overcrowd it either—you'll block the sunlight that it needs. Give it some space, give it some time. And trust that the Almighty Power of our loving God is capable of transforming tiny, brittle seeds...into fertile, fruitful life—day by day, week by week, life by life, from generation to generation!

Morgan has been the best dog I've ever had. Trusting in me completely from day one. Obedient to me completely from day one. His faith in me is *so big*. When I consider my dog's enormous faith in me, it makes me want to pray, "Lord, increase *my faith!*"

The Good News, according to our Savior, Jesus Christ, is that we don't *need* faith that big. Because of the immensely powerful faith of Christ's Holy Spirit working in us, a mustard seed's worth is all that it takes.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.