

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

With your permission, I'd like to back up our Gospel reading by two verses, and hear what Jesus has just said to the disciples. He says, "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." The apostles replied, "Increase our faith!" Perhaps they meant it like this: What?! Seven times in a single day?! O Lord, give me strength! You've got to be kidding! But apparently, Jesus wasn't kidding, and his reply teaches a lot about how faith can empower us for duty. That is, how a faithful relationship with God can help us do the things God wants and calls us to do; how God gives us strength and makes us worthy.

When I finally decided it was time for me to quit stalling and find out whether or not I had what it takes to become a priest, I went to the rector of my parish, surprised the heck out of him, and began the formation process that has brought me here to you. That process begins with a year or more of meeting with a discernment committee, the members of which, through discussion and prayer, are meant to help the aspirant determine if the call to ministry is a genuine one. Well, after some twists and turns, after passing through some storms of doubt, fits of laughter and tears, that committee concluded that I could be presented to the diocesan Commission on Ministry and move ahead in the process. I was very anxious about this first interview with the COM, especially when I was informed that I would also be meeting with the bishop afterward.

The day came for that interview, at St. Margaret's House in New Hartford, and despite all the months I had spent in discernment, I felt terribly unsure and inadequate. Especially knowing that I interview poorly. I get tongue-tied, can't think of words I want to say, and then often just start babbling incoherently. It's bad. Turns out that day at St. M's was no different. I was invited in the room, seated in the circle of inquisitors, and asked to speak about my faith. Even directly afterward, while I was waiting for my turn with the bishop, I couldn't remember what I had said in that interview, except that it wasn't very lucid. I had more doubt than ever that I was on the right path. I felt unworthy. I was tempted to just get up and go to the parking lot and drive away as quickly as I could. But I didn't. I knew that the COM folks were at that moment giving their report to the Bishop Adams, and it seemed to be taking an awfully long time.

And then his secretary invited me to join him in the library. When I had been seated across from him, he asked simply "So, Nick, tell me about how things are going." A simple enough question, for sure, but one which prompted me to go ahead and tell the truth. "Oh, Bishop," I said "I don't think I should really be here. I think this has all been a mistake. I don't think I am worthy to become a priest." To which he replied: "Duh, Nick, did you just realize this?! Of course you're unworthy!" This was not what one wants to hear from one's bishop! I was crestfallen. But then he went on to say: "Heck, I'm your bishop, and I'm unworthy, too! We are all unworthy to accomplish the ministries we hope to do, but God makes us worthy. God makes us worthy to do the things God wants us to do!" The next day, by the way, I received an email from the diocese that I had been accepted as a postulant, and could now continue my formation by applying for graduate studies at a seminary.

The reason I wanted to tell this story today is because of the plea that the apostles make at the beginning of our Gospel reading: "Increase our faith!" In Luke's telling of the Gospel, Jesus has just told them this: "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them." And they all respond by saying "Lord, increase our faith!" "O, Lord, give me strength!" If you want us to do something that hard, you'd better increase our faith. As it is, we are unworthy of such a task. We just won't

be able to pull it off.

Despite their doubts, though, Jesus assures them that even a mustard-seed size faith will prove sufficient. Jesus then offers the slave metaphor as a way of situating his forgiveness directive among the everyday tasks of discipleship. What the apostles hear as an extraordinary case of discipleship is, in fact, quite ordinary. Forgiving the most repetitive (but repentant) sinner is no more extraordinary than the servant tending the sheep or preparing dinner. What seems unworthy, the tiny mustard seed or the servant doing chores, is by God's measure very valuable and useful. So, what is faith, and why is it important? The fact that, as Jesus says, even a small amount of faith could be used to cause a mulberry tree to uproot itself and be thrown into the river, sounds like faith can do magic tricks! But I imagine that Jesus chooses some random thing, apparently points to the nearest object and dreams up the most fantastic of scenarios. He could just as easily have said "turn this tree into a rabbit."

Faith is not about magic, but it can be about miracles and marvels. And it isn't so much about the quantity of faith, but how about how it is used. I love the idea that God's creativity is like a wheel in spin, like a great spinning gear with cogs protruding, reaching out to grasp any random passing opportunity. God's dream propels this wheel, this gear, as it spins reliably and eternally, full of loving intent. Meanwhile, the wheels of our lives spin nearby, with cogs as well, creatively designed at our birth with the ability to mesh with God's own gear. It only takes faith the size of a mustard seed to nudge our wheels closer to God, close enough to engage and spin together with the will of God. And that unleashes all the machinery, all the activity, all the moving pieces which enliven God's kingdom. And even that little nudge of faith is sufficient. God will make us worthy to be a useful part of that great clockwork if we choose. And in that relationship, miracles are bound to happen.

In our Anglican/Episcopal tradition, we call such a synchronized life with God sacramental. Such a life is highlighted by the sacraments we celebrate through the church, Baptism, Holy Communion, Marriage, Ordination, and so on, but truly anytime we are in sync with God's dream is holy, sanctified, sacramental. Such times need not, and are often not, mountain top experiences. More often, we feel them, we notice them, in the course of our daily lives as we perform the tasks we need to do. But being enfolded in God kingdom, God's dream, makes even the mundane full of joy. So, a little humility is certainly a virtue. St. Paul knew and practiced this virtue, even while boldly pushing himself outside the box of comfortable evangelism, and it frequently got him into trouble with random authorities. It even got him into jail. He certainly must have just as frequently questioned his own worthiness. Yet he proclaims to Timothy that he is not ashamed, that he is thankful for being appointed as a herald, apostle, and teacher. And he pushes on faithfully, running the race and bravely fighting the good fight.

And Paul is constantly aware of the sacramental relationship of faith, as he reminds Timothy to 'rekindle the gift of God that is within you'. God has indeed planted the seeds of endurance and accomplishment within us; all the ingredients have been mixed into our creation by the great Chef himself, some of them no larger than a mustard seed. God indeed wants us to be worthy for the fulfilling of the eternal dream, even if we might doubt it ourselves. God's Holy Spirit has kindled the divine oven, and Christ is ready to slide life's cookie sheet in. Will we choose to be on it? Will we be bold enough to proclaim the recipe of the creator? Being faith-full is a warm and wonderful thing, and even mustard seed size faith, when it lovingly nudges us toward God, when it connects us with the spinning of God's dreams, when it invites God to make us worthy to do our duty, being faithful is gigantic! Amen