

I invite you to again listen to the beginning verses of our first reading in Habakkuk, as we find them in *The Message* translation of the Bible:

*The problem as God gave Habakkuk to see it:  
God, how long do I have to cry out for help before you listen?  
How many times do I have to yell, "Help! Murder! Police!"  
before you come to the rescue?  
Why do you force me to look at evil, stare trouble in the face day after day?  
Anarchy and violence break out, quarrels and fights all over the place.  
Law and order fall to pieces. Justice is a joke.  
The wicked have the righteous hamstrung and stand justice on its head.*

When we read those verses at our Tuesday Noon Bible Study, everyone in the group felt as though the prophet Habakkuk was writing words for us in our present time and current cultural context. The truth is our present context is one in which we sometimes find ourselves feeling as though we are trying to cling to our faith. The people of Judah **were** trying to cling to their faith. The prophet articulates their fear and their questions as they are facing military threats from their neighbors in Babylon and Egypt. And, after articulating their cries for help, Habakkuk then urges them to be **faithful** to God who **will** in time save them. The fact of the matter is that all of today's readings are about clinging to our faith when everything around us seems to be (*pardon my expression*) going to hell in a handbasket. In our New Testament reading, Timothy seems to be losing his grip as a leader of the early church. And, in our gospel reading, the

disciples – those who are closest to Jesus himself – seem to be wrestling with some crisis of faith. So, I find it hopeful that we hear these words today because they are so relevant for us in our present context.

Over the past few weeks, we have heard some rather perplexing and harsh stories from Jesus. And it is easy to **read** today's gospel passage and receive it as yet another harsh message of condemnation. However, it seems to me Jesus is communicating something else. So, listen again to the beginning of this passage with new ears. When the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, listen as Jesus answers the disciples with words of kindness, love, tenderness, and maybe even a bit of a smile. Jesus replied, "Why, you do not need more faith. Even this much faith (*his thumb and forefinger pinching together*) is **enough!**" You see, if we hear Jesus speaking with love it totally changes our hearing of his remarks. This passage is **not** really about quantity and having **more** faith. It is all about understanding what faith **is**, what faith **means**, and what faith **does**.

So, what is faith? In his famous 1 Corinthians 13 words, Paul understood faith as one of the three greatest gifts – faith, hope and love. In the New Testament, especially the writings of Paul, faith is often paired with love or said to work in conjunction with love. Furthermore, in Hebrews we

read, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

If we think about what faith is **not**, we understand that faith does **not** equal security, and faith is **not** assurance that all will go the way we want. Faith does **not** mean that we are assured of going to the holy wishing well and being given exactly what **we** think is in our best interest.

No. Faith in God seems to really be about a kind of surrender, a kind of letting go, a kind of commitment and a conscious recognition of where we place our **trust**. In his Large Catechism, Luther provides an explanation for the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me,” and I think his words might be helpful. He writes:

A “god” is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe in **that** one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the **trust** and **faith** of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God. For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God. (*The Book of Concord, p. 386*)

It is so very difficult in our “do it yourself” culture to just let go and place our faith and trust in God. I really wonder if this lack of willingness to let go, to let go of our need to control, is more often the problem than the

amount of faith we might have. When talking about this challenge, Richard Rohr writes:

A common saying is, “God helps those who help themselves.” I think that phrase can be understood wisely; but in most spiritual situations it is **not** completely true. Scripture clearly says, in many ways, that God helps those who **trust** in God, not those who help themselves.

We need to be told that very strongly because of our “do it yourself” orientation. As educated people, as Americans, as middle-class people who have practiced climbing, we are accustomed to doing it ourselves. It takes applying the brakes, letting go of our own plans, allowing Another, and experiencing power from a Larger Source to really move to higher awareness. Otherwise, there is no real transformation, but only increased willpower. As if the one with the most willpower wins! Willfulness is quite different than **willingness**. They are two different energetic styles and normally yield very different fruit.

The reality is we **already** have the faith we need. God **gives** us the faith we need. But, as Richard Rohr has said, we must show a **willingness** to allow God to be the one in charge, to **trust** in God even when this might seem so very hard, even when it seems like everything is going to hell in a handbasket.

Yes, God gives us the faith we need. However, we must be **willing** to actually **use** it, to actively live it, to allow God to use **us** and that is so very countercultural. As I hope all of you are aware, we **use** our faith to **serve** God, **not** to earn God’s love or salvation. We **use** our faith to serve God through our **actions** and the way we live together in community for the

sake of the world because that is what **faith** will expect of us. As theologian, Kimberly Long, suggests, “You already have the faith you need. Now fulfill its purpose: **live it!**” And, this is where the second part of this gospel comes in.

To understand faith in this way is to understand **faith as a way of life**. And, it is important to remember that we do not do this alone. We do it as we live together in community as the broken body of Christ. I think, the issue at stake is **how** we live together in community. God gives us what we need to flourish abundantly in faithful community. As the second part of today’s gospel reading suggests, in the economy of faith, we who serve depend on a benevolent master who not only **expects** us to obey but **gives** us all that is required to **do** so. And, much of that comes by living together as the community of the baptized. The Rev. Dr. Anna Madsen, in her book *I Can Do No Other: The Churches Here We Stand Moment*, writes about this baptized community and the life of faith. Her words are helpful as she remembers what she learned from seminary Professor Walt Bouman. She writes:

You see, as Bouman taught many of us, baptism only “works” if it is “used,” that is, if it is trusted. Our God is that in which or in whom we trust. Baptism initiates us into a life of trust in God, of our participation in the community God, into the **risen** Jesus. The word *community* is key here, for baptism is not only an individual matter. It is, of course, a promise to each individual person (we are known by

name). But baptism initiates us into the community of the baptized. We are, in a sense, baptized into a community of trusters. (*I Can Do No Other: The Churches Here We Stand Moment*, p. 22)

Yes, we are “baptized into a community of trusters,” the community of faith. And, when we live together and work together as the broken body of Christ, the faith we have been given enables God to work through us and do some amazing things. We have seen such faith at work in our own congregation as we joined other congregations to create Michigan Refugee Hope, an organization that has enabled us to provide life and hope to young refugees. In fact, through this effort, this congregation has taken in over fifteen young refugees. We will likely be taking in more yet this year. That is what faith **does**.

When Jesus speaks to us today, he is not so much talking about quantity of faith. He is talking about what faith **is** and what faith **does**. Faith is **not** stockpiled in a storehouse for the working of spiritual wonders. No. Faith is **lived out** as obedience to a just, merciful and loving God. And, as we walk together in community as the broken body of Christ, we find that the God who expects much from us also promises much and **does** provide all the faith we need. God provides all that we need to live into God’s call to **do** the work of justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.