

## ENOUGH FAITH

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

I feel the same way sometimes. You see, as the pastor of this church, I have a somewhat different perspective about the goings on in our faith community than those who simply come to worship Sunday mornings. Call it a “behind the scenes” perspective.

Sometimes, what I see “behind the scenes” feels like too much information. And it can get to a point where I really don’t want to know any more, thank you very much.

I’ve sat in with the ministers of Governing and Finance at their meetings while they spent hours, sometimes going late into the evening, wrestling with budget shortfalls and trying to decide how to most efficiently distribute the financial resources we have available to run our church operations and maintain our church’s four properties.

I’ve been at meetings of the Ministry of Worship and Spiritual Care when we discussed the challenges of things like ministering to our shut-ins, visiting the sick and those who are hospitalized, figuring out the best way to serve Communion, how keep the people who come here to worship safer, and how to make sure the quality of the altar flowers are acceptable to the people who paid for them.

I’ve taken part in discussions with people involved with our Christian Education program about disheartening Sunday School numbers—fewer children, fewer teachers and fewer volunteers, and if and how we might reverse that trend.

I’ve witnessed the Ministry of Christian Outreach and Stewardship make some difficult decisions as to which charitable organizations we will support with our mission dollars, because no matter how commendable they are we can’t support all of them, as well as tackle the demanding task of coming up with another stewardship campaign that catches the attention of the majority of congregation members and inspires them to continue their generous financial support of this faith community.

I’ve attended meetings of the Ministry of Members, Friends and Church Life and witnessed the struggles they’ve had, trying, not always successfully, to fill the numerous vacancies on our ministries that are vital to running our church and doing the work God has set before us.

Yes, as pastor I’ve witnessed all these difficulties and more; and I confess, at times it has caused me some anxiety and distress. When I’m lying awake in my bed

in the early hours of the morning, wondering and worrying about our faith community, I often reach out to God in prayer and share my concerns. I know in my heart that God is good and can always be trusted, but there are moments when my concerns about our church can overwhelm my trust. I need a booster shot of hope and confidence. So I implore the Lord, as the apostles did with Jesus: "Please! Increase my faith!"

Sometimes, praise God, I get a clear response to my prayer. And that response can be both surprising and at the same time very obvious. Because sometimes God's reply to me is, quite simply, "Fred, trust in me. Your church already has everything it needs. That's when I find myself asking a follow-up question. "Excuse me, Lord? We do? We already have everything we need? With all due respect, are you sure about that?"

And God replies to me, in various ways, "Yes, you do. I have given you the people to do the work I want you to accomplish. I have given you the leadership. And I have given you the financial and spiritual resources to do the job. The First Congregational Church has the members and friends, and the money. What's now needed is for you to take those things and let me lead you in how to utilize them." In effect, God is telling me that, with the Holy Spirit's help and guidance, there's nothing God is asking the people of the First Congregational Church of Scarborough to do that isn't doable in our present state.

Does what I just said sound strange? Far-fetched? Ridiculous? Are you thinking, "Ummm, I don't think so. We don't have enough money to do what we need to do or would like to do. We don't have enough willing people for all the tasks we'd like to undertake. Our church is growing older. Our financial base is shrinking. Everywhere we look we see deficiency and need."

This is called "Scarcity Thinking." And the bottom line is, scarcity thinking in a church is the direct result of not having enough faith and trust in God. Scarcity thinking is when a faith community focuses its attention more on what it doesn't have than what it does have. Scarcity thinking is when a church pays more attention to its shortcomings and weaknesses than the greatness and power of God. Scarcity thinking arises in the vacuum caused by a pessimistic, even hopeless assessment of a church's situation. Scarcity thinking gains traction when a congregation, and its pastor, forget that, despite the challenges, problems and needs their faith community has, they're still God's people. They are still a faith community whom God has called and authorized to be the church in that particular time and place.

And in our particular time and place.

Here's the thing. You and I, for better or worse, and for all our weaknesses and shortcomings, are the best that God has got right now to carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ here in our church. We're what God needs right now to do what God

wants us to do today in the world. And as for the future, which, admittedly, can seem somewhat bleak, we can pray and put our trust in the Lord to provide what we will need in the weeks, months and years to come.

Consider this morning's reading from Luke's Gospel. Jesus had called a small group of ordinary, imperfect people to follow him as his disciples. All throughout the Gospels, the disciples repeatedly and painfully revealed how deficient and flawed they were. Time after time, over and over again, Peter, Andrew, James, John and the rest of the twelve misunderstood and failed their Lord. But Jesus didn't fire them. Our Lord didn't pound his fist on the table and say, "That's it, boys. You messed up for the last time. Your services are no longer required."

Instead, Jesus stuck with them, despite all their flaws and shortcomings. Think about that—how Jesus chose to carry on with the people he first called to follow him, imperfections and all, even though he must have realized that he was setting himself up for more disappointment and heartache because they would almost certainly fall short of the mark again.

I think that, deep down, the disciples themselves realized how much they disappointed Jesus at times and repeatedly let him down. And I'm sure they felt terrible about that. The primary aspiration of every one of them was to please their Lord and be successful in carrying out the work Jesus set before them. But even a quick glance at the Gospels reveals that, time and time again, they failed him. And that's why the disciples begged Jesus, "Increase our faith!" They were telling him, Lord, if you're going to ask great things of us, then we need your help. Your guidance. Your power. So, please, increase our faith.

Jesus' reply to them must have been surprising. He told them, you don't need a great deal of faith to be faithful as one of my disciples. If you have even a tiny amount of faith—faith as small as a little mustard seed—"you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you."

As small as a mustard seed? A mustard seed is pretty tiny. Surely the disciples had at least that much faith. What Jesus was trying to tell his disciples was that they already had the faith they needed to follow him faithfully and be his disciples. They didn't need a whole lot more. They just needed to tap into the faith that was in them now and put it into action.

Sometimes we who are the church, the Body of Christ here on earth, don't give ourselves enough credit for the amount of faith we already have in us. We pray, "Lord, you know I'm not a saint. I've failed you repeatedly and have fallen short of the mark time and time again. I try to do what good I can, as much as I can, but I don't think I really have what it takes to be a genuine disciple of yours." Jesus' reply is, "You only need a mustard-sized amount of faith to be a true follower of mine, and I know you have at least that much in you, so get on with it!"

Time and time again I have seen this truth confirmed in the people of our congregation. Someone in this church once said to me after a tragedy in their family, “I just can’t endure the painful burden that’s been put on me. I’m not that strong a person. Why did God allow this affliction to come on me? I don’t think I can make it through this.” But they did make it. They went on. In fact, they not only survived, they triumphed. Their concern that they were “not that strong a person” was shown to be too modest an assessment of faith, and the strength and perseverance God had given them.

Another example. In the past, when someone with particular gifts has left a position on a ministry of our church or stopped doing something important for our congregation, I’ve asked myself, “What are we going to do now? Who will take their place and fill the void? They did that job so well and had such dedication. Things might fall apart without them.” But things didn’t fall apart. Yes, the person who left was sorely missed, but their departure led us to look for another leader whom God called to serve our church; and in the end we were blessed to have that other dedicated and able person take over.

We discovered that the new person had their own, unique gifts to offer our faith community that we never knew about. It’s just that nobody had ever asked that person before, so the gifts they brought to us remained hidden until they were asked. Or maybe God had been waiting until the opportune time to call that person, and that opportune time finally came!

That leads me to wonder, how many other gifts, and how many other gifted people, right here in our midst, has God blessed this congregation with that we haven’t yet discovered, or haven’t yet asked? And maybe you’re one of them! I hope you will think and pray about that.

Sometimes a faith community finds itself in a negative and pessimistic mood. A church can get trapped in “scarcity thinking.” And when that happens to us, this is my hope and my prayer. The next time we catch ourselves being anxious and concerned about our church’s future, or we find that our trust in God is wavering; the next time we plead with the Lord to, “Increase our faith! Give us more young families, more Sunday School children, teachers and leaders; give us more volunteers for our church’s ministries; send us some rich people to help us meet our church’s budget and to help us fix up the parking lot;” the next time that happens, I pray that you and I will stop worrying and fretting enough to hear Jesus respond to us.

Because, even with our very real weaknesses and shortcomings, Jesus will say to us, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, then you will have enough. It will be enough faith to do what I want you to do and call you to do. What you need to do is use it. And I will always be there to guide you, empower you, and cheer you on.

Thanks be to God. Amen.