

“Increase our faith,” his followers begged of Jesus, but what exactly do you suppose they meant? (*Luke 17:5*)

- He’d just told them stories about a rich man suffering in hell and disciples having millstones put around their necks
- They were probably scared and didn’t know how to avoid a fate like that, so they asked for more faith

We all know what faith is, right?

- Faith is when you think the flowers in your garden will look like the pictures on the seed packets
- Faith is when you believe the dentist when he says, “This isn’t going to hurt.”
- Faith is when you expect to win the lottery even though you didn’t buy a ticket
- For so many people, faith is believing in a world where things work out just like you think they should
- But our world really isn’t that simple, so we need to stand on a more solid foundation
- “Increase our faith” is actually a pretty good prayer, but I’m guessing we’re going to have to play a part in making it happen

In today’s second lesson, our patron saint Timothy seems to be suffering a crisis of faith

- The author (probably a follower of Paul) urges him to “rekindle the gift of God that is within you” (*2 Tim 1:6*)
- What do you suppose might have dimmed the light of Timothy’s faith?
 - Perhaps he had some discouraging setbacks in his ministry and was questioning his purpose
 - Perhaps a beloved friend or family member died, leaving him feeling lost and alone
 - Perhaps it was just one of those times when life seems to go flat and we don’t know where we stand
- All of those circumstances are perfectly normal, of course, but it’s not that easy to turn yourself around
- When you’re down in the dumps, you can’t renew your faith just by snapping your fingers

I keep using this word like we all understand exactly what it means, but I know it’s not that simple

- Is faith primarily a feeling, or is it a choice that we make?
- Is it a belief system or a way of living?

- Can we consciously grow into our faith, or is it simply a gift from God?
- I don't ask this out of curiosity—these questions are an important part of our foundation in life
- When times get tough we need our faith desperately, but that's the hardest time to figure out how it works
- It's better to start exploring the subject before a crisis comes

The letter to Timothy begins to address his struggles by remembering “a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice...”

- Many of us share a similar inheritance of faith
- One of my earliest memories is of picking flowers with my grandmother and placing them on the altar at her little church
- Psychologist and theologian James Fowler created a model of faith development, which begins with the primal and intuitive faith of infants and young children
- Their innocent and imaginative engagement with life's big questions often touches our hearts and brings a smile to our lips
- Those early years are an extremely important formative period—hence Jesus' warning to the disciples not to “cause one of these little ones to stumble” (*Luke 17:2*)

Though Timothy's father was Greek, his mother and grandmother brought him up as a Christian

- He was one of the first generation of children to have that experience, which has been carried in an unbroken line for twenty centuries
- But today it's obvious that's not the only kind of faith kids inherit
- People these days believe in financial success and human potential and political creeds and artistic creativity
- I don't mean to say that these perspectives are necessarily incompatible with Christian faith
- But our conversation about faith begins with the Bible dictionary's definition of the word: “reliance on God”
- “Praise the Lord,” says Psalm 146, who “keeps faith forever”

Fowler's next stages of faith describe the literal and conventional faith that arise among older children and adolescents

- As their capacities develop, young people begin to understand adult belief systems and to participate in our ways of living

- Their ideas and expressions may seem rigid at times, but that's part of the process of growing into faith
- It's normal for them to conform to family expectations and practices, and as they grow older the people around them exert a great influence
- That's why it's so important for them to have relationships and activities which help them find their place in the church, because there are plenty of less desirable possibilities

Social expectations play an important role in the lives of adults as well, often to the detriment of our faith

- Rebellious teenagers aren't the only ones who can be entrapped by indulging in alcohol and drug use, casual sex, or other addictions
- In this culture we can easily be seduced by our love of "things" and the drive to gather the money needed to buy them
- Or what about our obsessive busy-ness and the breakneck pace of our lives?
- It's easy to stand back observing our children or grandchildren and ask, When do kids get to play freely and just be children? When do teenagers get to know Jesus and claim their own faith?
- But what about us adults? How is our faith supposed to grow deeper and stronger when we're constantly occupied with other concerns?

This is such an important question because sooner or later, no matter what backgrounds we may have, our faith will be tested by a crisis

- When that time comes (and it will), the feeling of faith that was so comforting may be nowhere to be found
- The belief system that made so much sense may struggle to explain why things fall apart
- What we've inherited from our families may not be enough, and gifts from God may seem to be in short supply
- At times like this people may react by becoming more rigid and literal in their faith, or they may grow into a more reflective and integrated state
- It's important to remember that crises, much as we'd like to avoid them, always represent rich opportunities for growth and development

I was discussing this sermon with Marsha the other night, and she remembered a wonderful story, which she can tell much better than I can!

- Years ago we were backpacking in the Sierra Nevada mountains, and the trail into the wilderness area took us up a steep, rocky slope with a big drop-off on one side
- Though Marsha didn't like it she made her way up, but the whole time we were in the high country she was dreading the return
- As we approached the drop-off she got more and more anxious, waiting while I took my pack across and came back for hers
- The trail was too narrow to go side-by-side so she followed behind me, after crying out in her heart, "Lord, take my hand!"
- Suddenly she felt the warmth and pressure of a hand grasping hers, and the fear instantly dissolved
- She walked down through the scary part with no trouble at all

It was certainly a relief to get back to the car, but what's important in the story is the effect it had on Marsha's faith

- Having her prayer answered in such a tangible, physical way has always stayed with her
- She still avoids scary mountain trails, but there's a sense that she can get through a crisis when she needs to
- She doesn't try to explain how it happened, but Jesus was present when she needed him and that gives her confidence that he will be again
- Her maturing faith gives her a resource to support her through the challenges that will come next

There was also a moment when my faith leapt forward and matured

- Many of you know that as younger adults, Marsha and I didn't go to church for twenty years
- Our lives were really pretty good: raising our kids and running the family gardening business and being involved in community activities
- Then a friend invited us to a weekend retreat at the nearby Episcopal conference center, and we had a wonderful time
- We were surprised that these church people were interested in the same kinds of things we were

On the last morning we built an altar out of stones under a big, spreading oak tree behind the retreat house

- Someone brought home-made bread and a bottle of local wine, we sang some songs, and the priest said beautiful prayers
- Receiving communion in that setting was a transforming experience for me, in ways I still find hard to describe
- In that moment I knew Jesus was inside me, right in my heart, and that he'd been guiding and shaping me all those years
- I still had no idea that I'd ever become a priest, but we started going to church the next Sunday and have never stopped

You can probably see why I was touched by an essay on faith I read this week in Kathleen Norris' book *Amazing Grace* (p. 170)

- Norris is a well-read academic who in addition to her writing leads poetry workshops for children and adults, but what touches me most is the personal side of her reflections

Faith is still a surprise to me, as I lived without it for so long. Now I believe that it was merely dormant in the years I was not conscious of its presence. And I have become better at trusting that it is there, even when I can't feel it, or when God seems absent from the world. No small part of my religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as (an action word), not a 'thing' that you either have or you don't...

My new understanding of faith as like energy itself—fluid, always in motion but never constant—has been instructed by the Bible, the Christian theological tradition, and my own experience. Faith is a constant, always there, but surging and ebbing, sometimes strongly evident and at other times barely discernible on my spiritual landscape.

So we've seen that faith grows (or can grow) throughout our lives

- It's a feeling and a belief system and a way of living all at the same time
- Fundamentally faith is a gift from God, but it can't develop unless we respond by embracing it in our lives

- Struggling through the challenges we face is the only preparation for future crises, and finding companionship and support in our faith community is indispensable

Four years after we returned to church, I was preparing to go to seminary when my Mom died, suddenly and unexpectedly

- One moment I thought I knew what I was doing in life—the next moment I was consumed by shock and grief and the new landscape of our family relationships
- My faith helped me to muddle through the next few months, but I crashed hard the next fall when I went off to school
- Seminaries are well-known for challenging their students' belief systems, but mine wasn't a theological crisis
- My comfortable life had been turned upside-down, and I didn't know where God was in all of that
- My professors and classmates were worried about me, and I wondered whether I was really cut out for ordained ministry

The next summer I went off to an intensive hospital internship, prepared by warnings from second-year students of how difficult it would be

- The first times I tried to minister with strangers in the emergency room were truly terrifying—What could I do for them at the intersection of life and death?
- I remember sitting in a quiet place in the hospital one evening, praying for help and wondering what would come next
- Unexpectedly, a warmth and peace flowed through me and quieted my heart, and when the pager went off I was ready to respond

What's your story of faith? How is God working in your life?

What challenges have you faced, and how have they prepared you for what will come?

God is present everywhere, with all of us—Jesus is ready to take our hands—the Spirit is hard at work among us

Faith isn't that complicated, really—it's the gift of knowing that we can always depend on God when we need to