

“WHAT DOES GOD OWE ME?”


Message for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

October 5, 2025

HABAKKUK 1: 1-4; 2: 1-4 ** 2 TIMOTHY 1: 1-14 ** LUKE 17: 5-10

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

 Suppose that we all have driven by people standing on the corner of an entrance or exit ramp to the freeway holding a sign, "Will Work For Food" or something similar. I heard of one man who was more honest than most, his sign read, "I Need A Beer, Not Work."

Many of the others in reality only wanted a handout or money for something to drink, but tried to appear to have a genuine need and thus the offer to work if given the opportunity. If you were to stop and offer many of them a job I suspect that you would get many excuses why they needed cash and could not work right at that moment.

In the opening words of today's Gospel text, the 'apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" We can identify with that, can't we? How good that would be, especially when we find ourselves wavering. How comforting that would be, especially when we feel overwhelmed or when we face daunting challenges. Throughout the Gospel, we have watched the disciples grapple with what it means to follow Jesus. From the moment that they have left their fish nets in response to Jesus' invitation, the disciples have faced a steep learning curve. They have heard Jesus' challenge to 'take up their cross daily and follow me.' The disciples have been learning what Jesus' call to follow him entails. They are discovering that being called to follow Jesus isn't a 'one and done' event, but a lifelong pilgrimage of growing, learning, practicing, with challenges and failures along the way.

I remember when I was growing up, I would always open up the fridge and look for something to eat. I would stand there and just stare into the fridge, and wait to see if anything appealed to me. I think Mom had an alarm on the door, some light

or sound that only she could hear. It wouldn't matter if I had the fridge open for a second or a minute, she would always manage to yell out, "what are you looking for?" before I closed the door. And I always answered, "Something to eat." So she would say, "hurry up and find something!" She didn't want me wasting electricity. I wasn't worried about electricity; I was hungry and wanted something to eat!

People are doing the same thing today. They are searching for something to eat, spiritually. They want the satisfaction of knowing that they are doing the right thing, that they are loved by God. What they really want is God's approval, God's approval.

We need to remember something here. You and I don't deserve to be in this church building. We don't deserve to have the body and blood of the Lord touch our lips in the Lord's Supper as we will shortly. We don't deserve to be in God's presence. Some folks will ask, 'what does God owe me?' News bulletin, He doesn't owe us anything. The more we remember this, the more we will also need to trust in the blood of Christ for our forgiveness. With a deep understanding of our sin and unworthiness, we will also have a deep appreciation of our salvation in Christ.

We're Number 1!!! We have the largest Sunday School! We have a dynamic ministry! Dr. Good-Words is the world's leading authority on the Bible. We had the largest number of baptisms for the year! We support 500 missionaries! Our seminary has the most graduates of any other seminary in the world! Our annual budget is \$3 million dollars!

What if you were hearing that from someone in the church? Me, sometimes I feel like I am hearing a corporation's report to the Chairman of the Board or some sales pitch when I hear Christians or a Christian organization speak of themselves like that. Frankly, it often sounds like bragging. It also sounds like they have a handle on God's blessing that no one else has and that they are breaking their arm patting themselves on the back. Have you ever met someone like that?

We live in a society where bigger is better, more is better. Go into a fast food place, and we're invited to 'super-size' our order. Two for the price of one is common advertising in grocery stores. At most restaurants, the amount of food served is often more than a person can or ought to eat.

In the Bible, David got into trouble for numbering the people and I have some concern that in counting our "blessings" that we are suffering from the same pride

when we have such a grandiose spiel about our sheep, shekels and service.
'Umbleness does not seem to be one of our strong suits.

In fact "peer pressure" among pastors leads to some really strange accounting systems. This was several years ago but I once overheard a pastor who told another pastor that attendance at his church was 160 that week. I nearly fainted, but kept quiet. I was trying to figure where he was all week and this was Holy Week and I had not seen that kind of attendance the day I was there and I was sure that he was in the pulpit. Later, I asked him how he came up with that figure. As I said, this was Holy Week, and he was counting the attendance for each service including Sunday School. The total was 160. I thought, Duh, that is "correct," but they were the same 40 people not 160 unique individuals, which was what I was positive that the other guy was thinking when he heard 160. That is what is spawned when churches are run like a business rather than a ministry, but that is a different sermon. There's even a church in the area called God, Inc. for crying out loud!! God, Inc; don't get me started or I won't get this sermon done for another hundred pages.

There are huge homes going up, one trying to build a bigger house than his/her neighbor; bigger cars, SUVs because the bigger they are, the safer they are and it used to be that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, now SUVs are parked in driveways so big, there's little room for a lawn.

But bigger isn't always better. Some things we dread when it comes to more or bigger. Taxes, gas prices, utility bills.

Maybe that's why the apostles said, "Increase our faith." They wanted something more and measurable something better, but more than what? Better than what? And how do you measure something like faith?

We hear some people today talk as if increasing one's faith is the way to Spirit-filled bliss. Pray more and you will be blessed. Have joy in your heart and you will find riches.

A recent survey found that a majority of people agree that God wants us to be financially prosperous, the so-called prosperity gospel, where more is good and there is a measure of faith involved. Jesus' answer seems to take an opposite tack, smaller is better even faith as small as a mustard seed.

We know about smallness. We live in a world where mini and micro mean just as much as macro and mega. If fuel economy is on your mind, you can get a small car. You can get your name written on a grain of rice and it that's not small enough, I heard that experts can put a computer on a grain of sand, yes, you heard that correctly, a computer on a grain of sand.

So is smaller better when it comes to faith? It may seem that Jesus is advocating for a smaller faith. The apostles wanted mega faith. Jesus talks about micro faith. Regardless, mega faith, micro faith, or everything in between, are all good, size is not important. To put it another way, faith, pure and simple, is good. Hey we already have treasures in heaven, and great things can happen.

As followers of Jesus, there is no need for desperate quests for more faith. It is God's spirit working through the means of faith that makes all things possible.

I find it very interesting that the Lord starts this passage off by saying what a marvelous and miraculous thing we could do with mustard seed faith. A mustard seed is a mighty small thing. A mountain is well, a mountain. If I possess a puny thing, I can do a mountainous thing. Where does the glory lie, in what I possess or in what God can do with it? And all God's people would answer correctly and say, "Why, in what God does with my meager faith, of course!"

Our theology is often letter perfect but the application of it is pitiful. If all the glory is in what God can do with our puniness, then why do we strut and puff like we are so wonderful? Indeed, since none of us have tossed a mountain yet it appears that we do not even have mustard seed size faith. Therefore if any of the things that I mentioned in the opening paragraph are true, it only stands to reason that God should get even greater glory since what we possess is obviously microscopic and yet He brings about such huge results.

It is not All Saints' Sunday but the church, this church, has been blessed with persons who have inherited the faith and passed it on throughout the centuries. If you're thinking Bethel hasn't been around for a century, I know that and you do to, but we've been blessed. Yes, we may call some of them great in their faith but others are just 'normal' people who quietly lived their lives of faith. We can think of both kinds of people, I'm sure, as we look at the history of this congregation, the history of our own families, and the history of the whole church. Thanks to them, we have inherited faith, small as a mustard seed, but with the strength to move mountains to the sea.

Faith comes in all sizes, and God meets us where our faith is, whether it is as small as an atom or as big as Mount Everest. Our prayer is to grow in that faith as it points to one thing; our trust in the Lord. And for this, we are blessed as Christ walks with us as we live our lives, strengthening each of us in our own ways to be salt for the earth, light for the hill, seed of the word, and disciples of the mercy and justice of God.

Sure it may be difficult to live as a Christian – but it's also exhilarating, exciting, and eternally fulfilling! What exhilaration to hear and to taste and to feel the great things that God has done for us. How fulfilling to be used in his service! How exciting to be called to deal with sin seriously as he assesses our lives honestly! May we glorify his name for all that he has done for us and desires to do through us as he increases our faith in Him!

AMEN!!