

Sermon 8.7.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

1 Chronicles 16:8-23 | Hebrews 11:29-12:2 | Ephesians 3:14-19 | Mark 9:2-8, 14-27

In 2008, I was doing young adult ministry at a church, and I was frustrated. Despite my best efforts, our group of young adults – about a dozen in all – were constantly fighting and bickering, always focusing on the wrong things, and I couldn't see any evidence that they were even *interested* in faith. I was thinking about giving up on the whole thing.

One day we went to a nursing home to do an Easter egg hunt for the residents living there. The whole way over, our group complained, wondering *why* we were doing something like this. Over the next few hours I watched as they worked together, and visited with the residents, taking some of them outside for the first time in months. And I don't know exactly *when* it happened, but something changed. Working together as a team, seeing the joy on the faces of the residents, getting outside of themselves to serve other people changed these young adults. On the way home, they were excited. One of them said serving like that made them feel closer to Jesus, and the whole group said they wanted to go back.

In 2013, a woman named Diana Nyad made the news when she became the first person *ever* to swim from Cuba to Key West without a shark cage. She swam 111 miles in 53 hours to make the crossing. She had tried four times before and failed because of water conditions, sharks, jelly fish, and currents. And finally, on her fifth try, at the age of 64, she succeeded.

In an interview afterwards, she talked about the swim. About sharks circling around her in the middle of the ocean. About jellyfish stings covering her entire body, including inside her mouth. Even though she succeeded, during the swim Diana became dehydrated, her body swelled up, and at night she was so cold that her team decide *not* to feed her so that she keep moving and try to stay warm.

One of the interviewers asked her, “How do you keep going? How do you get through it?” And in response, Diana said that in times when she was full of doubt and wasn’t sure she could it off, when her faith and strength wavered, she would hum and sing to herself, and that kept her hope and belief alive.

In 2014, I was thinking about coming to serve here at Holy Trinity – first as vicar, and then (God willing) as your pastor. I had been meeting regularly with Pastor Kris, who was the interim pastor at Holy Trinity for a year and a half. She answered all my questions about the church and the people here, she told me about the strengths and room to grow, the history and the hopes of this church. And at our last meeting, she gave me a simple piece of advice, one that applies just as much to our personal live as it does to our life together as a congregation. She said to me, “Josh, what you feed grows.”

These three stories – about young adults finding faith by serving others, about Diana Nyad finding ways to keep going through the doubt and unbelief, about Pastor Kris reminding me that what you feed grows – these stories have been in my mind because of a question that appeared on my desk a few weeks ago on one of our sermon request forms. Someone asked, “What can we do in times when we feel our faith is not strong as it once was?”

All of us have times when we feel our faith is strong, and times when we feel our faith is weak. It’s normal to have mountain top times when our faith is strengthened and encouraged, *and* to have times in valleys when our faith is challenged. After all, there are lots of things in this world that tear at our faith, things like disease and sickness, unanswered prayers and questions, pain and violence. In our Gospel reading this morning, the story literally moves from a mountaintop where the disciples see Jesus’ glory and their faith is strengthened and they believe, right down into a valley, where a father is filled with doubt and fear and he’s

questioning his faith, because his child is sick and no one seems to be able to help. Our faith is often like that, full of mountains and valleys.

In fact, I think the reason I love this story from the Gospel of Mark so much is because the father down in this valley is someone I can identify with. He feels both faith and doubt at the same time. When Jesus tells him to believe that his son will be healed, the man immediately cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (v. 24) It’s one of the most honest and human and *real* lines in the entire Bible. This man is trapped between believing and not believing – wanting to believe, but really having trouble, really struggling to do so. It’s like he’s saying, “Part of me believes, and part of me doesn’t, but I *want to*, so please help!” This is a man asking for his faith to be made stronger.

So what does a “strong” faith look like? Often we’re tempted to judge how strong our faith is by comparing ourselves to others. But that inevitably leaves us either feeling arrogant or inadequate. Measuring our faith by comparing ourselves to other people is never helpful.

Our world teaches us to be strong, and I hope that your faith *is* strengthened today as we come together to sing and pray and hear God’s Word together. As your pastor I pray for you regularly, and one of the things I pray is that God would strengthen and increase the faith of the people here in our church community.

But I also want you to know that it’s okay to sometimes feel like your faith is “weak.” God is okay with weakness. In fact, our Lord, who was weak enough to be crucified on a cross, has a way of working *through* and doing amazing things *with* weakness. In 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote, “So I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. For whenever I am weak; then I am strong.” (2 Cor 12:9b, 10b). In the New Testament, God says, “My grace is sufficient for you, and my power is made *perfect* in

weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9a) Jesus boldly said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:3) He spoke of faith just the size of a mustard seed (Matt 17:20), and told parables about these tiny seeds growing into mighty plants. (Matt 13:31-32)

As one of my colleagues says, God has a habit and history of looking at weak, struggling people full of doubt and saying, “Ha! Now *that* I can do something with.” (NBW)

If you feel like your faith is weak, take heart. Our reading today from the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (12:2). And just as Diana Nyad said that singing was a gift that got her through times of doubt and fear, God has given *us* gifts to strengthen our faith when we feel weak or full of doubt. Gifts to keep us going.

Gifts like **remembering**. Over and over in the Old Testament, God tells the people of Israel to *remember* all the things God has done for them. To *remember* when God brought them out of slavery in Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. To *remember* all the times that God has been faithful to them, taken care of them, watched over them, and loved them. In our first reading, God tells the people of Israel to *remember* the wonderful works he has done, to *remember* the covenant he made with his children forever. (1 Chronicles 16:12, 15) Being able to remember is a gift for us during times when our faith feels weak. We can remember the times that God has taken care of *us*, has watched over *us*, we can remember all the ways God has provided for us and guided us through life. By remembering, our faith becomes stronger.

Gifts like **community**. In our reading from Hebrews, we’re encouraged to remember that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses – heroes of our faith like Abraham and Moses, Gideon and Barak, Deborah and Mary – but also the people of faith that surround us here in our community at Holy Trinity. When we feel like our faith is weak and we’re struggling, our brothers and sisters in Christ are there to keep us going, and we help each other to believe. We

lean on one another, we keep our candles lit together, we encourage each other together, we support each other together, and we build up each other's faith *together*. Through community, our faith becomes stronger.

Gifts like **the Bible**. The Gospel of John says that the words of the Bible "are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31) The Bible is a gift given to us to help strengthen our faith. It points us to Jesus. It tells us God's promises and reveals God's character. When we doubt if God loves us, we heard the familiar words again from John, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son..." (John 3:16). When we feel abandoned or alone, Jesus speaks the words from Matthew to us, saying, "Surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:20) When we're full of doubt, the scriptures beckon us with the words of Christ, who said, "Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28-30), and when our faith feels weak, the Bible tells us about Jesus and his grace all over again. By reading the Bible, our faith becomes stronger.

Pastor Kris was – and is – right: what you feed, grows. If you want your faith to grow, feed it. Get outside of yourself and live the words of Jesus by *servicing* other people. *Remember* all of the ways God has been present in our life and cared for you, and trust that God will continue to do so. *Share* your struggles and your burdens with the people in this faith community, as we help each other believe. *Open* the Bible and hear the words of Jesus, the one sent, crucified, and resurrected *for you*. And remember that in the midst of your weakness, your struggles, your doubts, and your unbelief, Jesus is there, with you then too, saying, "Ha! Now *that* I can do something with!" Amen.