

Three Small Steps in Our Journey of Faith

One day the great Michelangelo attracted a crowd of spectators as he worked. One child in particular was fascinated by the sight of chips flying and the sound of mallet on chisel. The master was shaping a large block of white marble. Unable to contain her curiosity, the little girl inquired, "What are you making?" He replied, "There is an angel in there and I must set it free."

Every Christian at their confirmation or conversion is handed a large cold white marble block called religion. We must then take the mallet in hand and set to work. Religion is not our goal but we must first start there. Now there are many names for religion. At times we do call it religion but we often use other words and images to describe it. Sometimes we call it our faith. Jesus spoke in terms of the Kingdom of God. We say we are the Church, Christians, or Disciples. There are many names with varying nuances of meaning but in the end they all describe the same thing. We are a people of Faith, faith in Christ to be sure, but faith nonetheless.

We are not a business or institution. We do not sell or produce anything. We advocate no earthly cause. We serve no worldly authority. We come to a church building made by men. And to do what? Practice our faith. But we just as well could have met on a hillside or cave.

Our leader is not here, not so that I can show him to you or offer irrefutable evidence of his existence. That means faith is all we have. We are born through faith, live by faith, and die in faith. After my death, then and only then will I know in full, as the Apostle Paul says, when I see Jesus face to face. Until then I had better understand this religion thing. Now that sounds pretty daunting doesn't it? Here's the good News. It's not all that difficult. Religion is a marble slab and we have to find, like Michelangelo, the angel inside. Chisel with me a few minutes this morning and let the chips fly, and let's find the faith that lives inside. Faith: it is the angel of our religion. Faith can set us free if we know how to live it. How do you practice your faith and not just religion? Jesus outlined faith in Luke 17. He explained there are three simple ways to exercise faith. Three small steps make up our journey of faith.

1. The First Step Is Learning to Forgive.
2. The Second Step Is Learning to Believe.
3. The Third Step Is Learning to Serve

For faith to grow is what the disciples (sorry, apostles in Luke) want. But they're asking for the wrong thing. They are looking for something that is measured quantitatively: "Increase our faith" and while you're at it, "increase our investments." Jesus replies to the effect that it's not about quantity. The tiniest fragment of faith can accomplish the extraordinary. They don't need more faith. They need to recognize what faith is and does. Faith, in any quantity, can do marvelous things because of the trusting relationship it points to between God and us.

I wonder if the ridiculousness of Jesus' example (uprooting the tree) might indicate that he thinks of faith as something you either have or you don't. It may be as hard to "increase our faith" as it is to become "a little bit more pregnant."

I read in one of the commentaries that the point here is not to be able to move trees or mountains, but to recognize what God is doing among the trees and mountains and all of creation, including people. To test the faith is to rely on OUR willpower. However, when we focus on God's will and power, we begin to see the world very differently. Is it possible that the mustard seed parable is about our joining God in God's creative work--the focus being on God and what God is already doing and God's invitation for us to join in the fun.

For Lovers, Duty Is Only Natural

Ask any parent who gets up at 2:00 a.m. and then at 3:00 a.m. and then at 3:30 a.m. to answer the cry of a sick baby. Lovers never ask, "What's the least I can do?"

Ask any man whose income is so limited that after he pays his rent and buys his groceries he has only pennies to spare. But his sweetheart has a birthday the next month and he has his eye on something that means he'll have to go without lunch for three weeks. So he buys it.

Are any of these lovers looking for a medal? No. They're only doing their duty. And it's only natural.

Our relationship to Christ is like that. For although Jesus may have been cracking a small joke when he portrayed how ludicrous it could have been if the master served the slave, yet that ridiculous reversal of roles is just what took place in the Upper Room when the Master served the disciples, washing their feet. It was symbolic of his entire ministry, including the cross. (by Alvin Rueter from *Freedom to Be Wrong*, CSS Publishing Company)