

“*Faith and Great Faith.*”

Today’s gospel is all about faith. But if you were to ask someone, familiar with the Bible, to choose a favorite passage of scripture that described faith, they would likely point you to Hebrews 11:1, which reads: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (New Revised Standard Version).

I can remember memorizing that passage at an early age, and perhaps even learning to love it. But now that I’m older, it strikes me as somehow simple, and not very challenging. It seems to suggest that faith is a commodity that can be had fairly easily – you simply have to accept what you’re being told by someone whom you trust and, *Poof!*, you’ve got faith. To some extent, that’s true.

When our children were young, and asked us, for example, why the moon and sun could share the same evening sky, we explained to them as much as we knew about the movement of the sun and moon and earth. And our girls believed us and, *Poof!*, they had faith that this was how things work in the universe. And when they later asked us about God and Jesus, and we told them

as much as we knew – and as much as we thought they could handle – they believed us and, *Poof!*, their faith was enlarged to include that information.

I think, for many people, our faith develops in much this fashion: gently and gradually, being nourished by the people we know and trust, and whose experience and knowledge we're comfortable taking at face value. And there is absolutely nothing wrong or unusual about having a faith that has developed like this. This describes my own faith journey, and I'm glad for it.

But something makes me think that the faith of the woman in today's gospel is somehow different. One reason I think that is because today's gospel is the *only* place in the Bible where I can find Jesus describing someone as having “great” faith. Why is that? What makes her so special? Well, let's revisit that story for a moment.

One day, a woman comes near to Jesus and his entourage and, shouting to be heard over the crowd, asks Jesus to help her daughter, who “is tormented by a demon.” At first, Jesus seems to ignore her. When the disciples urge Jesus to send her away, because she is been quite the pest, the woman rushes forward and throws herself at his feet. “Help me,” she begs. But Jesus only gives her a very reasonable explanation for why he should *not* help

her daughter. This woman, however, is intelligent, and desperate, and so she counters the rationale offered by Jesus. At this point Jesus compliments her great faith, and agrees to help the woman's daughter.

Think about that for a moment. How many of us would have the courage to argue with Jesus? Or the temerity to try to change his mind? Apparently this woman did, and that says something about her; something special. Though she is the only person specifically described as having great faith, there are a couple of other people mentioned in the New Testament whose faith, had he been given the opportunity, I believe Jesus would have also described as great.

For example, the gospel of Mark, in the ninth chapter, describes an encounter between Jesus and a man whose son was also being tormented by an unclean spirit. The man is clearly distraught by the whole affair, and asks Jesus if he can cast out the unclean spirit. (Not 'Will you help my son?' but 'Can you help my son?') In one of his more famous statements, Jesus says "All things are possible for one who believes." To which, the father offers up an equally famous response, "I believe; help my unbelief." I find this man's honesty disarming. I'm not sure if I could stand before God and say "I believe *in* you," and then be

honest enough to say, “but I’m not sure if I *trust* you to do what you say you can do.”

Also, in the gospel of Matthew, in the eighth chapter, a Roman centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant, who is paralyzed and suffering terribly. When Jesus offers to go to the soldier’s house, to heal the sick servant, the centurion assures him that it won’t be necessary; that Jesus can do whatever he is going to do, right where he’s at, and the centurion is confident that, despite the distance involved, his servant will be healed. And although Jesus doesn’t describe the centurion as having great faith, he does say, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.” And that, I think, is almost the same thing.

Now, when I consider my own spiritual journey, and compare my faith with that of those three people I’ve just described, I’m honestly dismayed, because I don’t think I’d measure up. My faith, by comparison, is in the minor leagues. I’m not as *courageous* as the woman in today’s gospel, or as *honest* as the man whose son is tormented by the unclean spirit, or as *confident* as the centurion. I still get sweaty palms and a queasy stomach when facing something unpleasant. God forbid I should have to face something enormous; I don’t think I’d be up to the task.

And to complicate my dilemma, not only can I compare my faith to those these three biblical characters, there are any number of real-life people I can consider: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, for example, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or C. S. Lewis, and the list goes on and on. These are people whose faith is celebrated, they are our spiritual brothers and sisters, and when I think about trying to stand next to them, all I can think is, “No way!”

Fortunately, if there is one thing I have learned, and it’s this: When it comes to faith, things are not always the way they seem. Several years ago, I was listening to a book on tape, *The Salmon of Doubt*, a collection of writings by the popular English author, Douglas Adams (better-known for his bestseller, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*). Among the short stories and recollections in *The Salmon of Doubt*, Adams describes something that happened to him. This is how Adams tells the story:

I had a train to catch. I arrived at the station about twenty minutes early, so I bought a newspaper, to do the crossword, and went to the buffet and bought a cup of coffee. I also bought a small package of cookies. Laden with all these new possessions, I went and sat at a table. Also sitting at the table, opposite

me, was a perfectly ordinary looking business man. No sooner was I seated when he leaned across the table, picked up the packet of cookies, tore it open, took one out, and ate it. Well, in the circumstances I did what any red-blooded Englishman would do: I was compelled to ignore it, because I searched my soul, and discovered that there was nothing anywhere in my upbringing, experience or even primal instincts to tell me how to react to someone who has quite simply, calmly, and sitting right there in front of me, stolen one of my cookies. I stared furiously at the crossword, but I couldn't do a single clue. So I took a sip of coffee, but it was too hot to drink, so I braced myself, and took a cookie, trying very hard not to notice that the packet was already mysteriously open. I ate the cookie. I ate it very deliberately and visibly, so that he would have no doubt as to what it was I was doing. The other man took another cookie and ate it. The problem was, having not said anything the first time, it was somehow even more difficult to broach the subject the second time around. So I went

into the breach again, and took another cookie. And for an instant our eyes met, and then we both looked away. But there was a little electricity in the air. There was a little tension building up over the table. We went through the whole packet like this: Him, me, him, me. It was only eight cookies but it seemed like a lifetime of cookies. So, when the empty packet was lying dead between us the man at last got up, having done his worst, and left. I heaved a sigh of relief, of course. As it happened, my train was announced a moment or two later, so I finished my coffee, stood up, picked up the newspaper, and underneath the newspaper was *my* package of cookies.

Things are not always how they seem, and especially when it comes to matters of faith. Adam's experience started me thinking again about all the *great* people of faith – and the *ordinary* people of great faith – and I began to realize that I was worrying about things I didn't need to worry about. After all, these people didn't suddenly wake up one morning with a tremendous reservoir of faith in God. Rather, I am willing to bet that their faith was simply shaped by the circumstances of their lives. That is to say, their

lives were such that their faith was challenged, time and time again, and rather than being done in by those circumstances, they discovered within themselves enough faith to persevere, and in the end their faith was enlarged.

The challenge for ordinary people like you and me, in our individual spiritual journeys, is not to look for ways to avoid the difficult circumstances of life, or to try to hide behind the hope that our faith, such as it is, will shield us from the heartache and pain that is common to human life. Rather our challenge is to face the difficult times, relying on what faith we do have to see us through. Or, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews once described it, to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

We may be tempted to look at the woman in today’s gospel – or at any of the people I’ve mentioned – and think “I’ll never be like that.” But the grace of God is such that any of us can look forward to a day when we too will have great faith, or, in any event, enough faith to be courageous *before* God, and enough faith to be honest *to* God, and enough faith to be confident *of* God. How we get to that point will vary with each person, but we can all start at the same place, and with something as simple as Hebrews 11:1: “For faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”