
QUANTITY VS. QUALITY

I'd like to take an informal survey: in our society today, do you think we are more focused on quantity or quality? Quantity? Quality?

- When I speak at or work with other churches, I'm often asked, "How big is your church?" (That's a "quantity" question.)
 - When asked that, I usually answer, "About a quarter of a block."
- The better question to ask, rather than "How many does your church have?" (size determines credibility) is "How is your church at making disciples?"
 - Making disciples (not members) is what we are called to do as a church and as Christians individually.

In the gospel reading this morning, JESUS teaches some important things about being disciples:

- making sure you don't cause someone to stumble;
- correct and forgiving others;
- answer the invitation to serve as JESUS calls us to.
 - When confronted with all of this, we may feel like the disciples and say, "LORD, increase our faith!"
 - "We need more faith if we are going to be able to do this."
- But when it comes to increasing our faith, I think it's a good idea to consider do we mean more, in terms of quantity, or better, in terms of quality.

Whatever the disciples intended, quality or quantity, when they said they needed an increase, JESUS gives them the illustration of the mustard seed.

- JESUS says, "If you even as much faith as a mustard seed, you could uproot a tree."
 - The mustard seed was the smallest seed they would plant in the Middle East in that day,
 - and in contrast to uprooting a tree, it was night and day.
- But what JESUS was saying is that, instead of asking for a faith that is powerful, we need to develop a faith that is significant.
 - JESUS is saying that we should focus on quality rather than quantity, and that our faith should be deeper, not wider.

There is a description that is often used about megachurches these days:

- they seem to be a mile wide, but an inch deep.
- I don't mean to pick on our partners in Kingdom ministry, but it seems that they are more focused on numbers (quantity) than they are on discipleship (quality).
 - They offer services that are heavy on entertainment and light on commitment.
 - The messages they present are focused more on what they have decided are the sins of those who are not in their church, or who are not welcome in their church,
 - so that those who are there can feel comfortable about who they are now.
 - The preaching and the ministries don't move those present to grow.
 - It only helps them to judge others from a sense of self-righteousness.

That isn't to say that preaching shouldn't make us feel good about ourselves, as GOD'S beloved children.

- Yet is there anyone of us who feels we have arrived at the place where GOD wants us to be in our faith development?
 - I'll let you take a look at your own faith, but I'll be honest and say that I'm not there yet.
 - When I hear the words, "Forgive even seven times a day," like the disciples, all I can say is, "Increase my faith!"
 - "Help me to grow, LORD."
 - "Help me to do the things YOU want and need me to do—even the hard things."
 - "Help me to become more and more the person YOU want me to be."

Let me give a caution, though: be careful what you ask for.

- It would be nice if we could ask for something and have GOD just zap it into us.
 - GOD doesn't work that way, however.
- If you want greater patience, expect to be put among people who will push you to the edge of losing it.
- If you want to be more forgiving, know that you will find yourself with people who will hurt you.
- If you want to become more trusting, be assured that you will be asked to give control away to others more and more.

The disciples said, "Increase our faith," and JESUS said, "Okay. We're going to Jerusalem and I'M going to die and within three days, I'M going to return to life."

- "YOU are going to...what? INCREASE...OUR...FAITH!"

But when they saw it happen, those who stayed faithful, that is those who kept their faith, were more fully able to trust GOD.

- They didn't have anything to do with the resurrection.
- Yet, in the resurrection, they found a depth of faith that allowed them to be the instruments through which GOD performed great things.

What JESUS is telling them and us today is that less is more.

- "If you have faith so small that you can barely fathom it..."
 - Do any of you wonder if your faith is even the size of a mustard seed? (That's quantity.)
 - Do you wonder if your faith is able to uproot trees? (That's quality.)
 - Faith is not a commodity that can be measured.
- Rather than wanting a powerful faith that allows you to walk around ordering the destruction of forests,
 - what GOD needs in us is a faith that is pure and simple with integrity,
 - that witnesses to our trust in GOD and accepts each GOD-chosen assignment with joy and readiness.

When my brother, Joel, was diagnosed with lung cancer, he began to regularly send out what he called "medical updates," where he listed for his readers what was going on with him and how he was doing.

- Joel ended each of these updates with the same two points:
 - "GOD is still good all the time," and
 - "I'm still ripe for a miracle."

- With stage four lung cancer, there is no survival apart from miraculous healing.
 - But Joel also knew and professed that he would receive a miracle.
 - He was given a 5% chance of living two years.
 - Joel lived ten more.
 - Joel knew that there wasn't anything he could do about his situation.
 - There was no magical formula.
 - It didn't require a certain number of people to pray (that's quantity, by the way).
 - But Joel believed and told others, that one way or another, he would be miraculously healed.
 - And he was.
 - Because isn't the resurrection to life after death miraculous?
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Our faith doesn't make us powerful beings.

- Instead, it makes us believers in and followers of a powerful being.
- It is GOD alone who enables those of even the smallest faith to say to a tree, "Go take a swim," and it will happen—
 - that is, if it is GOD'S will.

Do we have faith that GOD will provide the resources we need to care for an aging property?

Do we trust that GOD will keep this church going to fulfill what GOD needs us and calls us to do?

Do we believe that GOD will give us the words we need to invite someone to come and encounter the living CHRIST in this place?

Do we have faith that GOD will reach multitudes of people through us?

Do we know that through our smallest efforts and those of others that the disease of hunger can be cured?

Do we trust that even the power of death is not too great for GOD to conquer?

Increase our faith!

- Help us to trust in YOU alone, O GOD.
- Give us YOUR vision for both YOUR church and YOUR beloved children.
- Increase our faith, and grant us YOUR quality rather than the world's quantity.