

There's Enough on Your Plate

In his book, "The Orthodox Heretic", Peter Rollins creates a parable which he calls "Finding Faith." According to Rollins, "There was once a fiery preacher who possessed a powerful but unusual gift. He found that, from an early age, when he prayed for individuals, they would supernaturally lose all of their religious convictions. They would invariably lose all of their beliefs about the prophets, the sacred Scriptures and even God.

So the preacher learned not to pray for people, but instead he limited himself to preaching inspiring sermons and doing good works. However, one day while travelling across the country, the preacher found himself in a conversation with a businessman who happened to be going in the same direction.

The businessman was a very powerful and ruthless merchant banker, who was honored by his colleagues and respected by his adversaries. Their conversation began because the businessman, possessing a deep, abiding faith, had noticed the preacher reading from his Bible. He introduced himself to the preacher and they began to talk. As they chatted together, this powerful man told the preacher all about his faith in God and his love of Christ. He spoke of how his work did not really define who he was but was simply what he had to do.

"The world of business is a cold one," he confided to the preacher. "And in my line of work I find myself in situations that challenge my Christian convictions. But I try, as much as possible, to remain true to my faith. Indeed, I attend a local church every Sunday, participate in a prayer circle, engage in some good works and contribute to a weekly Bible study. These activities help to remind me of who I really am."

After listening carefully to the businessman's story, the preacher began to realize the purpose of his unseemly gift. So he turned to the businessman and said, "Would you allow me to pray a blessing onto your life?"

The businessman readily agreed, unaware of what would happen. Sure enough, after the preacher had muttered a simple prayer, the man opened his eyes in astonishment. "What a fool I have been for all these years!" he proclaimed. "It is clear to me now that there is no God above who is looking out for me, and that there are no sacred texts to guide me, and there is no Spirit to inspire and protect me."

As they parted company the businessman, still confused by what had taken place, returned home. But now that he no longer had any religious beliefs, he began to find it increasingly difficult to continue in his line of work. Faced with the fact that he was now just a hard-nosed businessman working in a corrupt system, rather than a man of God, he began to despise his work. Within months he had a breakdown, and soon afterward he gave up his line of work completely.

Feeling better about himself, he then went on to give to the poor all of the riches he had accumulated, and he began to use his considerable managerial expertise to challenge the very system he once participated in, and to help those who had been oppressed by the system.

One day, many years later, he happened upon the preacher again while walking through town. He ran over, fell at the preacher's feet and began to weep with joy. Eventually he looked up at the preacher and smiled, "Thank you, my dear friend, for helping me to discover my faith."

In a parable handed down to us from our ancestors in the faith, Jesus' disciples ask him to "increase their faith." It is a request that I believe many of us can identify with because who among us has not at some point or other asked for the gift of more faith? If only we had more faith, we would be able to believe and if we could believe we'd have the courage to cope with whatever crisis is overwhelming us.

If we could only believe, we'd be able to understand why, or how, this, or that. If we could just believe strongly enough, we'd have the courage to risk, to speak out, to stand up for, to open up to, to ask for, to go on, to do something. If only we could believe in God, believe in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, believe in the

power of the Holy Spirit, if only we could get it all straight in our heads, we'd be able to tell all the world what it is we believe.

In the meantime, we'll just keep on struggling to believe. For years and years, I used to believe that what was necessary was to just believe. So, I struggled to understand what all those "I believe statements" that the church, the community of believers asks its followers to make.

I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth

And in Jesus, Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead and buried,
The third day, he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

I remember the first time I could say that in church without having to look at the words in the hymnal and I was so proud of myself!

Over and over again, in liturgies, Sunday after Sunday, the church; the institution of the faith, offered me the opportunity to stand among the faithful to declare what it is that we believe.

Whether it was the Apostles or the Nicene creed, the church made it very clear exactly what it is that we are supposed to believe in order that we might number ourselves among the faithful. The very word "creed" itself was handed down to us from the Latin "credo" which translates into English as "I believe." It was as if belief and faith go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. So, just believe, and you will have faith and all you need is just a little faith and you can move mountains.

Only, I can't quite seem to believe well enough because my faith isn't capable of moving the bush that is in my front yard. So, it's back to the drawing board as I try to wrap my head around the stuff I'm supposed to believe, so whatever you do, don't bother me, because I'm working hard at believing. Working hard to understand all this stuff that I'm supposed to believe, in order to be numbered among the faithful. Only, I can't quite believe it, in just the right way or I don't quite believe it enough or in sufficient quantity to move much of anything.

Just wait a minute until I can get it right. Hold on, Jesus, I'll be right with you, just as soon as I can get it all together. I'll follow you anywhere you want me to go, but just hang on until I can get my head around believing all the things I'm trying to believe. Yes, siree, Jesus, I'll be right with you! I believe, and if you'll only help my unbelief, then together we'll change the world.

Well, Jesus might have been tired of the same old excuses because just as soon as the disciples began to get tired of the hardship of following him and begin pleading for more faith, so that they can keep on following him, Jesus says, "Well, wait a minute, you don't really need all that much faith, all you need is a little bit, no bigger than the size of a mustard seed. Why just a little faith can move mountains or bushes in your front yard or whatever else you want to move.

Notice Jesus' response to the disciple's request for an increase of faith. He doesn't talk about believing more, believing harder, believing better, or believing at all. Jesus response has nothing to do with belief. It focuses on doing – faith is the power to accomplish something – even the impossible. If the disciples had the faith, Jesus says, the size of a mustard seed, they could command a mountain to jump in a lake and it would obey.

Jesus is not very subtle. His rhetoric is quite clear. But somehow, maybe because it's convenient, we tend to miss the point that Jesus is trying to make. Maybe it's easier that way. After all, if we hear what Jesus is saying, it might have major consequences. We might actually have to do something.

Faith is a way of life. Faith is not about believing. Faith is about deep seated confidence, about trust. Believe is more like an opinion. We can believe something to be true without it ever making any difference to us. We can say, I don't know if that is true, but I believe that it is. I believe that my relative wealth is the result of an economic system that oppresses the poor. I can believe that as strongly or as deeply as I want, without ever doing anything about it.

Faith is trusting that there's a better way and embarking down that road. Faith has nothing to do with waiting around until you have all your ducks in a row. Faith is just taking off down that way trusting that you'll find a way. You don't really need a whole lot of faith to change reality. As that old commercial said, Just a little dab ill do ya!

One or two, or three or four faithful people can change the world. It happens all the time. Each and every day, faithful people manage to change the world. You don't need more than a mustard seed's worth of faith to change reality.

Speaking of mustard, how many of you know about Coleman's English Mustard? Coleman's mustard comes in a tin and the tin is full of powdered mustard that you mix with a little water. You can keep a tin of Coleman's mustard in the pantry forever. You don't need a refrigerator and there is no expiration date. You just mix a little mustard powder with water whenever you need it and you have good fresh mustard. Jeremiah James Coleman became one of the wealthiest men in England by selling powdered mustard.

Coleman used to say that he grew rich not so much from the mustard itself, but rather on the mustard people left on their plates. By his reasoning, there was enough powdered mustard in each tin to do a family for a lifetime, so he should only be able to sell one tin to each family.

But in practice, after people would mix up the mustard, use only what they needed, they would leave the rest lying on the plate. It was all that mustard that was left over that made Jeremiah Coleman rich.

It seems to me like all too often we are wasting a wealth of faith on our plates, enough faith to make us all rich.

There's a story that Oscar Wilde recorded in his memoirs about how his reality was changed by a simple act of kindness. Oscar Wilde was imprisoned for the crime of being a Homosexual and while he was serving his sentence, his estate was forced into bankruptcy. According to Wilde: "When I was being brought from my prison between two policemen, a man waited in the long dreary corridor so that before the whole crowd, whom an action so simple hushed into silence, he might raise his hat to me, as handcuffed and with bowed head, I passed him by... I do not know to this present moment whether he is aware that I was even conscious of his action. I store it in the treasure house of my heart. I keep it there as a secret debt that I am glad to think I can never possibly repay."

He goes on to say “When wisdom has been profitless to me and philosophy barren, and the proverbs and phrases of those who have sought to give me consolation as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little lovely silent act of love has unleashed for me all the wells of pity, and brought me out of bitterness of exile into harmony with the wounded, broken, great heart of the world.”

That is a mustard seed gesture, the tipping of a hat, and yet, it sustained Oscar Wilde through some incredibly dark hours.

We all too often assume that it takes huge acts to embody faithfulness, grand gestures to change the world, more often than not it's just simple everyday acts of human kindness that change reality. Built one upon another, these simple acts of faithfulness can change who we are as a people. We already have enough mustard on our plates to make the whole world rich. Our actions have consequences. Our faithfulness, our willingness to head off down the path of Love, of kindness, can move mountains. Our inter-connectedness, our humanity, means that our way of being in the world makes a difference.

Desmond Tutu often talks about the South African concept of Ubuntu. According to Tutu, “Ubuntu speaks of the very essence of being human. In South Africa, they say, “Hey so and so has Ubuntu.” When you have Ubuntu, you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. Ubuntu is to say, “My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.” We belong in a bundle of life.” We say “a person is a person through other persons.”

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or threatened as if they were less than who they are.”

If, as Desmond Tutu insists, a person is a person because of other persons, then surely the kind of persons that we are will make a difference to the kinds of persons our fellow travelers can become.

Tutu tells a story about what he considers to be one of the most formative experiences of his life. “When I was a very young child,” said Tutu, “I saw a white man tip his hat to a black woman. Please understand that in my country such a gesture is completely unheard of. The white man, was an Episcopal bishop; the black woman was my mother.”

With the tipping of a hat, reality was changed, a simple gesture of respect and love. We assume that in order to make the world a better place, we should somehow increase our faith, make it bigger, deeper, better than it is. We assume that bigger is better; more powerful, more noticeable. All too often we hold off, we hesitate, we tell Jesus to go on ahead of us, we'll catch up just as soon as we can get it all figured out, when we already have enough on our plate to make the whole world rich!

Set off down the road, begin with kindness, generosity, love, and trust that there's more than enough on your plate to make life rich. Amen.