

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
October 2, 2016

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You know the difference between the Bible and the lectionary. (That sounds like the set up to a Henny Youngman one-liner! But I am playing it straight.) The lectionary is the portion of scripture used at Mass. And *someone* has to decide where that portion begins and ends. In many cases the choice is made easy by the Bible passage itself. But in today's gospel account it is not so easy. As it stands, the passage gives the appearance the Apostles cried "Increase our faith" *totally out of the blue*. But of course it doesn't work that way. The Apostles asked for faith because they had been provoked by something Jesus had said. He had said things it would be impossible to accomplish without increased faith.

So what was going on? The Lord began by telling His disciples to recognize the inevitability of temptation. Each of us will fail to become completely free of sin in our lifetime. The good news is that Christ does not condemn sinners but came to save them. *And save them He will!* By use of God's appointed means of grace we are undergoing treatment. We are in process of remission. Bouts of the disease may flare up and afflict us for as long as we live. But Christ will have the victory. We who belong to Him have the hope of glory. And it is a *reasonable and holy hope*.

The Lord then went on to say something else. Even though we have a disease called "sin" it is nevertheless our solemn duty not to pass it on to others. When we do we are not only *sufferers* but also *perpetrators* of sin. And Jesus said some devastating things about such conduct. Truth be told we sometimes like to project our problems on to others rather than make necessary changes in ourselves. But those we call "others" are souls for whom Christ died. They too need help rather than more temptation and trouble from us. Spreading sin and temptation is a grave problem because it betrays our Lord. It is *this*, among other proclivities of fallen human nature, the Apostles recognized in themselves. No wonder when Christ gave pause they exclaimed, "Increase our faith!"

Faith is what causes us to believe the doctrine of Christ more firmly. As a consequence we rely more confidently upon all the means of grace the Lord would use in our pursuit of holiness. Greater faith in God's pardoning mercy promotes the renunciation of our sins and the seeking of His forgiveness and absolution. It also

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gets us over the greatest difficulties that lie in the way of forgiving our brother and not adding to the temptations he is battling.

It is possible that at this stage in their development the Apostles' asking "Increase our faith" still meant "Make us miracle workers like you, Jesus!" It is possible they still really *did* want to uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the ocean. But then our Lord's response would have been, "What could possibly be the worth to our Heavenly Father or to suffering humanity in doing such a thing?" To equate faith with power and a payoff is to go down a blind alley. It's a non-starter. As the old *Monopoly* game put it: "Do not pass GO; do not collect \$200."

The Lord said faith is like a mustard seed. It is small like a speck of dust. The difference is the dust is dead and *the seed is alive*. That is the critical ingredient. Faith must be a living and active thing. More than that, Christ does not answer. God does not pour faith into us like we pour milk on a bowl of *Cherrios*. Here then is the most important thing. It is the particular glory of the human character in each one of you that faith will develop and deepen only from your struggle with the particular difficulty or temptation that is yours. It won't be Aunt Sally's temptation or your neighbor Louie's difficulties. It will be *your* battle. Deeper faith will come in no other way, and you will not have it at all if things are made easier.