

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

A friend of mine tells the story of the first time he went to a truly authentic Japanese restaurant. In addition to the chopsticks at each place setting there was a little jar on the table with what appeared to be some sort of guacamole. Not knowing any better he doled out a teaspoon full on his plate and proceeded to put half of it in his mouth.

Needless to say it wasn't guacamole. It was wasabi, otherwise known as Japanese horse radish. Immediately, his eye began to water, his sinuses tingled intensely, and his taste buds went on high alert. It didn't stay in his mouth long, and the lesson he learned that day was that a little wasabi goes a long way.

When the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith in today's Gospel, they really have no idea what they have at their disposal. Like wasabi, a little faith can go a long way.

From what they know from direct experience, the disciples arrive at the conviction that following Jesus is so challenging that they mostly just feel overwhelmed and not up to the task.

They are willing to acknowledge some faith, but they believe that God will need to give them more if they are to be successful disciples.

Jesus wants to give them confidence that they already have what they need, even if they are not utilizing it to its full potential. Comparing faith to a mustard seed, which is really so tiny you can hardly see it, is really designed to encourage them to look at the faith that

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

they do have, and not to underestimate it. If properly nurtured and exercised, even a little faith can do wonders.

This came home to me during my stint as a hospital chaplain intern. In about the second week of the program my fellow interns and I were informed that, at the hospital we were working at, it was that chaplain interns that took turns being on-call for emergencies.

Our supervisor, Sr. Joan, must have seen the look on our faces when we heard the news. She asked whether we were feeling anxious at all. Anxious to the point of being speechless about it would have been the appropriate response if any of us could have gotten the words out.

She proceeded to say, “Well, let’s go down to the ER and get acquainted with the staff there and simply take it one step at a time.” I think that helped a little—until one of the regular chaplains began talking concretely about some of the situations we would encounter.

We were paralyzed with fear and convinced that we would never measure up to the challenge.

The actual remedy for the fear came in the doing. Since there was no way to get out of the duty, we simply had to go forward. Sometimes that mustard seed of faith does indeed look pretty small.

And yet when exercised, it does have power. 30 years later I can still remember some of the encounters I had during my service on call. I’ve blocked the earliest ones

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

out of my memory—they were that bad, but with time I began to see beyond the panic and recognize that God was present and even inspiring me in the use of the gifts he had given.

The main thing is not how much faith we have, or feel we have in the moment. The main thing is that we respond in faith. Even tiny faith can grow and have its effect: joining us to God's saving activity, making us instruments of his care for others, and moving us forward on our journey until we arrive at that point where our faith really becomes robust and sturdy.

It becomes the go-to option for responding to the challenges of the day, our second nature and the virtue that motivates us to keep at it even when the temptation to throw in the towel rears its ugly head.

Instead of asking for an increase in faith, maybe a prayer we could pray today would be something like, "Lord, help me take seriously the gifts you have given me and how powerful they are, so that I will not shy away from their use, but put them into practice so that they can grow stronger and become the full-grown plant you have designed them to be. Amen."