

# Margreta Silverstone: Faith – In the Tough Times

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## Faith – In the Tough Times

Mark Twain said, "If you want me to talk for five minutes, give me a month to prepare. Talk for an hour, well I can do that in five minutes." When Marjory couldn't preach as part of this series, Learners and Teachers did some quick adjusting. I reluctantly volunteered to preach, but only if I could have a bit of time to get prepared. I think I ended up with close to a month. I still plan to talk for more than five minutes though.

Initially, Ron was going to preach today. He used the scripture passages from today for [his message a few weeks ago](#). It isn't often that you get to hear two different takes on the same set of scripture readings. While Ron spent time working with "Singing the Lord's song in a strange land" and commitment in exile, I'll focus on the [Gospel lesson](#).

### Increase our faith

A little context, just before what was read, Jesus warned the disciples that if someone is responsible for leading another person to sin, it would be worse for them than if they drown. He told his disciples that they are to forgive and keep forgiving. The disciples, after hearing these things, blurt out "Increase our faith!"

Have you ever asked for more faith? Sometimes when seeing tough situations at work, I admit thinking more faith might help the circumstances. Generally though, what I am asking for

is a more positive perspective. Am I short of patience? *Have more faith.* Am I looking for a quick solution to lift employee morale, train an aging workforce reluctant to use technology, and automate more simple work processes? *Have more faith.* As though faith was the magic pill, capable of solving all my problems and turning me into Superwoman in the blink of an eye.

The disciples' responses are understandable. I've done it myself. And Jesus' little vignette bursts the bubble. If faith existed as a magic pill we could swallow, and the magic pill was the size of a mustard seed, we could all be tossing mountains into the sea with the same ease as tossing rocks into mud puddles. We delude ourselves when we objectify faith. Worse, we ignore the mystery of God when we believe faith is a case of positive thinking.

Bishop John Shelby Spong in his book *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* identifies other ways we objectify our faith and belief. While I haven't finished reading the book, he argues that the creedal position of many Christian churches also objectifies our faith and belief. His examination of the Nicene Creed against the backdrop of our knowledge about the world leads to questions: What does faith mean today? Where is God and what is God like? How are we to live our lives if the faith statements of the past do not hold up to current understanding? In too many churches, people have traded the first hand experience of the sacred for the position articulated in a creedal statement.

Seekers has never been big on creeds, although we do articulate something like a creed when recommitment Sunday rolls around or when a new person joins the core membership. Actually, the Seekers commitment is more creedal oriented than the original Church of the Saviour statement. Here are some samples:

*We believe:*

- *That the Creator – father and mother to us all, ground of being – loves, sustains and calls us;*
- *That Jesus is the Christ, who for our sake lived, was crucified, died, rose from the dead, and now bids us to a ministry of love and justice;*
- *That the Holy Spirit, as the empowering presence and breath of God, confronts and inspires us to do God's work in the world.*

The original commitment to membership in the Church of the Saviour:

*I believe as did Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I unreservedly and with abandon commit my life and destiny to Christ... I will seek first the Kingdom of God and his Righteousness.*

*I believe that God is the total owner of my life and resources. I give God the throne in relation to the material aspect of my life. God is the owner. I am the owner. Because God is a lavish giver I too shall be lavish and cheerful in my regular gifts.*

In the season of recommitment, we don't generally spend the Sundays prior to recommitment focusing on what we are going to say on recommitment Sunday. We do wrestle with questions: What are we doing here? Are we prepared to experience God first hand, with our crash helmets and life jackets? Do we know how we will be living our lives when we leave this room? Are we aware of the TNT we may be creating in this world?

Jesus blows up the disciples' concept of an objectified faith, no quick fixes to following the path of God. No quick ways to learn how to be forgiving of others. Jesus tell another story, a story that points the disciples in a different direction, one that is harder to grasp.

# Faith as Practice

Jesus launches into a story: a servant has been out all day, doesn't matter what the servant has been doing, plowing in the field, taking care of sheep, whatever. Yes, the servant is tired, it has been a long day and now he or she gets to come home, but don't expect the master to get up, fix dinner and tell the servant to rest. No, the master expects to be treated like the master. Attend to the master's needs – fix supper or whatever is wanted. And definitely don't expect the master to say, "Thank you, all that has been done is what is expected." The servant is supposed to do these things and to say, "Oh, it was nothing, I was only doing my duty."

This story is pretty tough. No matter how many times I read it, it still feels like a slap in the face and a reprimand to shape up. In some ways the story reminds me of the elder brother in the prodigal son parable, I start to feel resentment building along my spine at the fact the master doesn't bother to say thank you for my hard work and effort.

In the past few weeks, this story has been hard for me to hear. The last time I preached I shared with you about my miscarriage and the newness I had been given in my job. While I believe my job has been a new birth in my life, I still wished to experience a child's birth. A few weeks ago I had yet another miscarriage, my second since the time I preached, third within the course of the last twelve months. I am tired of a God who hasn't rewarded the work I have done in the past year. I am tired of having grieved over two losses. With the third pregnancy, I thought I could come in from the field and receive my thanks and reward. I can identify with the servant.

But how does this story respond to the sentiment of the disciples for increased faith?

I looked up what Webster's had to say about faith:

1. Belief in God, revelation or the like; as, soundness of faith
2. Fidelity to one's promises, allegiance to duty or to a person: loyalty.
3. That which is believed
4. Complete confidence.

Jesus' definition of faith had more to do with the second usage in the Webster's Dictionary: fidelity, allegiance, loyalty, or faithfulness.

The faith exemplified in the story Jesus tells isn't an object; it is a verb. The servant demonstrates Jesus' understanding of faith. Learning how to stay the right path and forgive others isn't a magic pill, it is a matter of duty. Faith takes hard work, is often mundane and routine, and is a thankless job. The story of the servant in response to duty living a life of faith also invites us into a relationship with the one whom enlists such duty. The servant knows the master. The servant knows the mystery of God.

Jesus' story about the servant points out that faith is hard work. There are no quick fixes for faith. Each day we can do our daily tasks as acts of faith, writing documents, balancing accounts, cooking, cleaning or studying. Each day we have the opportunity to practice forgiveness and exercise choices for an exuberant life-giving life. While it is hard work, Jesus reminds us we are doing this work in response to our relationship with God. Faith isn't possessed; it is lived.

Faith is mundane. Taking care of sheep and tending the fields were common activities in that day. Learning to choose life and forgive others isn't always obvious. In whatever emotional state we are in – anger, fear or joy – we can exercise our faith. In all relationships there are mundane tasks that need to be done. I am not a morning person; in the morning, Jeffrey is the one who gets up and makes coffee for the both of us. In the evening, I am the one who walks to the mailbox and gets

the mail. There are other little things that are done each day, routines, habits we have formed which balance our lives together and often have roots in the needs and the love we have for each other. In the same way, Jesus story invites us to establish habits reflecting our love and relationship to God. We can do our small tasks so they bring life and help us learn to forgive others, whether cleaning up the dishes or putting gas in the car.

Faith is a thankless activity. God expects us to work at the tasks at hand, to consistently serve without a thank you. At work recently I had a person leave a very gracious thank you note on my voice mail. I saved the message and thanked her for it when I saw her last week. She commented on how sad it was that saying "Thanks for work done" wasn't done much. While I agreed with her, this passage has made me wonder if I am wrong to desire gratitude from others for work I should be doing anyway. In our relationships of love with others, we do things for them because our love and loyalty makes them the right thing to do. We don't care about being thanked. We might want to know they were the right gesture. God expects our relationship to cause us to work at forgiveness and following the right path, no need to reward or thank us for our service.

Is there no reward for service? Daily living provides me the opportunity to deepen my relationship with the mystery of God. That is reward enough. I do not wish to have gone through these three miscarriages. They have brought pain and sorrow to my life, which like shadows are always present in the backdrop of my daily experience with others. The wonder is, sharing the disappointment has enriched and deepened the relationships I have with others. I made some choices to share the sorrow of my miscarriages with other people at work. While I feared the consequences of the choice, I am amazed at how it has connected me to these people, has allowed me to see the beauty of these people in new ways, to see the mystery of God in those who are around me. How do we increase our capacity to

love and forgive and follow God? By daily living, in small choices for life and love, we learn to go deeper, to see the burning bush, the holy ground, while others only touch the surface and eat blackberries.

In the season of recommitment, we are to take time and reflect on our faith and commitment to God and this church. Jesus tells us not to worry about not being sure of an objective faith. We don't have to have the answers of faith all neatly written down in a creedal statement. The willingness to commit our lives on a daily basis to an unknown mysterious God is an act of faith. It's a "Good Enough" faith.

And every month, we have the opportunity to stand in a circle in this room and deepen our relationships. The communion table is a place for us to work at staying on the right path, to work at loving and forgiving others, to increase our faith. And the communion table is a place where we can deepen our relationship to the mystery of God. Life jackets anyone?