

My youngest daughter seemed to disappear part way through high school. Physically she was still present. But meaningful communication all but ceased. Dialogues such as: "Good morning." "Who says?" and "How are you today?" "Who cares?" choked off any effective communications. Any thought of offering help, much less advice, soon disappeared.

Okay. There were a few moments during which the younger Abby reappeared. Discussions about college selection and attempts at learning to drive a stick shift were encouraging; perhaps this really was just a phase and not a total severing of relationships.

When Abby returned to college for her sophomore year she asked permission to cash in her meal plan and do her own cooking. Since she knew that I had done that same thing I agreed. A few weeks later she called to ask if she really needed to boil the water before she put the pasta in it. I almost laughed as I imagined a solid mass of sticky, gooey pasta. Fortunately, I did not. I assured her that she did need to follow the instructions and boil the water first.

That phone call asking for advice became the turning point in our relationship. We have great discussions on most any topic; she still seeks advice on multiple subjects; she even has offered advice to me. But that is another story.

If you had to summarize all of the advice that you would like to pass on to a child or a young business associate, what would it be? There are books and books and books of advice on how to live. But to condense it down to a few sentences, to focus on what is really critical, tends to be a challenge.

Paul has condensed his advice to Timothy at the beginning of this second letter. Paul starts with reminding Timothy of his faith, the faith that he has received from his mother and grandmother. Paul assures him that this faith dwells within him; yet it is like a glowing ember that needs to be fanned into open flame. Not only is this faith a gift of God, it is to be guided by a spirit of power and love and self-control. In essence, Paul is saying that you have what you need, now keep using it to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus.

But this very advice carries a challenge, a barrier that might prevent Timothy from really hearing the advice, much less accepting it. Paul is suffering for his faith. Rather than telling Timothy not to worry, this won't happen to you, Paul instead places his suffering in context. For Paul knows that he has placed his trust and confidence in Jesus, Jesus the Messiah, who is the answer to death, who is life everlasting, who has the power to protect Paul until he is welcomed home by God as a faithful servant. Further, that power is enough to protect Timothy as well. Paul ends his advice with an encouragement for Timothy to carefully guard that which has been entrusted to him.

I often wondered what number of variables led to those difficult years with my daughter. Times in which I wanted to help her, encourage her, offer advice on how to grow and mature through the challenges that she faced. Perhaps one of the barriers to deep communication was my own lack of confidence: the realization that I wasn't the perfect parent, that I did not have whatever it took to offer advice in a way that would be heard and considered.

Perhaps we all have our own perceived inadequacies that keep us from offering advice, or prevent that advice from being heard constructively. Perhaps those are the same barriers that prevent us from sharing the Good News, barriers that Paul was urging Timothy to overcome.

A sense of inadequacy is a barrier that seems to exist in the passage from Luke. The disciples are asking Jesus for more faith. How often do we think that we have the same need?

The reply of Jesus seems to be rather strange.

First he talks about faith the size of a mustard seed and what it can accomplish. Then he continues to talk about servants and masters.

Just as Paul needed to address his suffering in the context of following Jesus, we need to back up a few verses to understand the context of the disciples' request. Jesus has just told the disciples that they are to forgive those who sin against them. Even if a person claims to repent for their sin and then does the very same thing again, they are to forgive them. Even if this happens seven times in one day, they are still to forgive this sinner.

At that point, I think that I would be alongside the disciples asking for more faith; more faith than what I might have in order to forgive the one who wronged me, over and over and over again. The reply of Jesus was that faith as small as a mustard seed could uproot trees and fling them into the ocean. Perhaps he saw the doubt on their faces; doubt that they even had that much faith. Or perhaps that they considered tossing trees around as being far easier than forgiving others.

So Jesus continues with the story of the servant and the master. While his advice might seem a bit obtuse to modern ears, the disciples would have easily grasped the absurdity of the master inviting the servant to sit at the table with him. No, the servant was expected to do his job. Work the fields. Get cleaned up and cook. Feed the master. Then perhaps there might be time for the servant to eat.

There is a story of a couple both of whom had full time jobs. The husband did not like to clean, he especially did not like to clean the kitchen. After a particularly stressful day for his wife, he decided to clean the kitchen. He washed the dishes, cleaned the counter tops, swept the floor. And waited. And waited. Finally, he pointed out what he had done and asked his wife if she was going to thank

him. Instead, she stated that she had cleaned the kitchen for years and that he had never once said thank you to her. She merely considered it a job to be done and did it. Much like the story of the servant and the master.

Yet this parable goes deeper; especially when linked to the story of the mustard seed sized faith. The disciples asked for more faith in order to do what they were asked to do. Jesus did not immediately grant them more faith; rather he told them that they were to do their job, repeatedly forgive the sinner, with what they already possessed. What they had was sufficient.

I fear that sometimes we keep asking God for something, something that we consider essential to being the person God desires us to be, and are disappointed when God does not immediately answer our request. Perhaps the silence that we hear is God saying that we do have enough, now get out there and do your duty.

Advice can be as hard to accept as it is to give.

Barriers exist.

Our faith often seems insufficient.

Yet, there is advice and then there is something, something much more compelling. We call it the Gospel, the Good News. Central to the good news is this table, the Master's table. As incredible as it might have sounded to the disciples, we are invited to come and sit at the table with the master. All barriers between us have been removed. We come by faith. Yet at the table our faith is renewed and strengthened; we are assured that we have been granted all that we need to follow Jesus.

Let us come confidently and celebrate this simple feast of forgiveness and empowerment.