In the South, you find many churches where there is audible vocal response to the sermon. It’s not just an amen here and there. It’s a style of preaching which has something to do with the content of what’s being preached. In one such church one day the preacher began:

• “It takes FAITH to make the church walk.

And the congregation responded,

• “Amen brother. Let her walk, let her walk.”

The preacher was encouraged by this and said,

• “Yes and it takes LOVE to make the church run.”

And the congregation said,

• “Amen brother. Let her run, let her run.”

The Spirit really took hold of the preacher at that point and he said,

• “Yes and it takes MONEY to make the church fly!”

And the congregation responded.

• “Let her WALK, brother, let her walk.”

Now with that introduction, you may think that I am going to talk about the stewardship of money today but I am not.

The Apostles said, “*Increase our faith*!” Where did that come from? Without reading or hearing the few verses just before this statement, “Increase our faith” seems like a thought just hanging there. So let’s put it in context. Let me read Luke 17:1-4 to you.

*Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, “I repent”, you must forgive.*’

*The Apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” The Lord replied, ‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you.*

I’m sure that clears it all up. Probably not, so let me go on. In verses 1-4 Jesus is saying: You are going to stumble, that is be tempted and fall, but even worse off will be the one who causes you to stumble. And there will be times when you will cause others to stumble and woe to you when you do. So be on your guard, watch that you neither stumble nor cause someone else to do so.

If someone, that is a brother or sister sins, rebuke them – that is, tell them, point out what they did wrong so they may know and repent. And if they do, forgive them. Even seven times a day if need be! If they repent, *you must forgive*, says Jesus. No option there. Not you may, you can, you should. Jesus leaves no room. YOU – MUST – FORGIVE!

THAT’S the context for “*Increase our faith*!” The Apostles may be thinking, “You must be kidding! That’s impossible. Forgive? Seven times in one day? Are you nuts? I don’t have the faith to do that but you said it so you must mean it.” “*Increase our faith*!”

We know Jesus’ response. Mustard seed faith. *‘If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea”, and it would obey you.* Now WE are saying, yeah, right!

We have heard the whole faith as a mustard seed and the mulberry tree being uprooted many times before. And while it could literally be true, I think Jesus is using it in hyperbole to make His point that it takes only a miniscule amount of faith to do something amazing. Jesus is talking about, as the King James version calls it, a sycamine tree or black mulberry tree. What you may not know is that a black mulberry tree could live to be 600 years old and to do so meant having an incredibly deep, wide and strong root system. So it’s not so much about how much faith do you have as it is about exercising the faith you do have. And in this instance, it is faith that will allow you to forgive.

One author said that this level of living a life of faith is nothing more than living at a level of survival. “Your capacity to forgive the same person seven times every day is the key to your spiritual survival. And if you don’t forgive, you are going to suffer physically. You may even die prematurely. Medical people tell us that there is concrete evidence that grudges and resentments cause much of our illness: cancer, cardiovascular diseases, arthritis, migraines. Our health is directly related to our ability to forgive. The sincerity of the person asking for forgiveness has nothing to do with our response.” Jesus says you must forgive – “for your own sake”, adds this author.

Let me tell you a story by way of example. Two sisters had a falling out over something - I do not remember over what. The one asked for forgiveness but the other, the offended party, would not grant it – after which they did not speak to each other. Eventually one of them died with the problem unresolved.

Years later the second sister, who had been the offended party was at a conference in Tanganyika, now Tanzania. At one point, when there were prayers for people in need this sister came forward and said that she had not slept through the night for 25 years and would like prayers for that. Also at this conference was Bishop Alfred Stanway who was the Bishop of W. Tanganyika, which after he retired years later was split into 5 dioceses. It took 5 Bishops to do what he had been doing. He was an amazingly gifted spiritual man who had, among other gifts, the gift of knowledge. He asked the second sister if she would like a ride to their hotel to which she said yes. They got in the car and began talking about the conference. Just before they got to the hotel, Bishop Stanway turned to her and said very matter of factly, “You need to forgive your sister.” Then he got out and went inside. She was stunned! She had never said anything to him about it and knew that the Bishop did not know about that event in their lives. Once again she did not sleep through the night and slept very fitfully at that.

Sometime before the end of the conference the Bishop asked her if she had forgiven her sister yet. She said “No! I can’t! She is dead!” He said, “That doesn’t change the fact that you need to forgive her. It won’t help her but it will help you.” After further talking they prayed together and the woman forgave her long dead sister. And that night, for the first time in 25 years, she slept through the night and was rested when she awoke.

*If another disciple sins, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. The Apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”*

Jesus’ response, which every commentary I read agreed, was that what He was saying, indicates that it’s not about having a lot of faith but having some. One writer said this, “Jesus is concerned not about faith’s volume but about its presence. God can work with even a little faith. … Jesus is arguing that a little faith can do surprising things… so do not fret about how great your faith is; only apply what you have and watch it work.” Another writer said, “It is not so much about having great faith in God that is required as having faith in a great God.”

There’s a song I used to sing with the young people in many places where I worked with youth. It’s called Faith. The words are:

Faith, faith, faith just a little bit of faith,

Faith, faith, faith just a little bit of faith,

You don’t need a whole lot. Just use what you’ve got.

Faith, faith, faith just a little bit of faith.

And then I would substitute other one syllable words like: hope, love, peace and just to be a little silly, because it was youth after all, I would usually add soap. And it’s true. All you need is a little. Hotels have known this for years and so they give small bars so as not to be wasteful. And they work just fine! You don’t need a whole lot – just use what you’ve got…. Faith is like that too! But unlike hotel bars of soap, faith grows rather than diminishes as it is used and exercised.

If you want greater faith exercise the faith you already have, however great or small you may deem it to be. God wants us to have faith, pray in faith, exercise faith. The exercise may be expecting something rather than just hoping it will whenever we do pray in faith. If we are going to pray in faith, we need to believe it’s going to happen!

Where in your life is there a need to forgive?

Where in your life is there a need for greater faith?

Each one of us here is facing something or another in our lives in which a little faith exercised would make a difference. I don’t know what that is but you do. Unleash the faith you have and let God use it. Remember, “It is not so much about having great faith in God that is required as having faith in a great God.”

As an act of faith, I want you to sing with me that silly little song that I used to sing with the youth. We’ll do faith, hope and back to faith, no soap today…

(sung with guitar)

Faith, faith, faith just a little bit of faith,

Faith, faith, faith just a little bit of faith,

You don’t need a whole lot. Just use what you’ve got.

Faith, faith, faith just a little bit of faith.

Hope…

Faith…