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Planting Daffodils in the Snow

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It started snowing that gray, dark, cold late October day in Wisconsin when I was helping my mother plant about 100 daffodil bulbs. We wore heavy coats and warm hats and our fingers were red from the cold of the air and the earth. As I dug into the cold ground, which would soon be frozen, and gently planted these dead looking brown bulbs that would soon be covered not just with dirt but also with snow, it occurred to me what my mother and I were doing could be considered an act of faith.

Because it was sort of ridiculous, and certainly seemed to be wrong, planting bulbs while snowflakes swirled around our heads. Most gardeners know that bulbs like daffodils are usually planted in the fall, but most gardeners do such planting on cheery, sunny, warm fall days where the promise of life and growth is closer to recent memory and easier to believe. It is much harder to believe a promise of green stems and bright yellow blooms on a day absent of blue skies and warm sunshine. Yet, that is when we had the time and so that is when the bulbs were planted, because we had faith in nature, whether or not the atmospheric conditions that day were conducive to our beliefs. We planted. It snowed. And when the winter was over, we indeed were blessed with bright green stems and blooming yellow star-like daffodils.

Ever since then daffodils have been my favorite flower, perhaps because daffodils remind me of the day my mother and I did an act of faith by planting those daffodil bulbs as it snowed.

Today's Gospel made me remember that act of faith when Jesus' disciples, or apostles made their demand for more faith. I say "demand" because in the original Greek this is not a polite request, it is more like a command, a strong response to something Jesus has said. If we had read the 4 previous verses in Luke's Gospel we would have read that Jesus was laying out some expectations for his disciples; namely that they were to do what they could to prevent others from "stumbling" or losing faith and they were to forgive everyone who asked. It seems the disciples thought these expectations were impossible sounding and the only way they could ever hope to fulfill such expectations was if Jesus would give them more of something they felt they needed to do such difficult tasks: faith.

Faith is a word we hear and use a lot in church. It could be one of the churchiest of church words. I shudder to think how many times the word has appeared in the sermons I've preached. The trouble with words we use all the time is we can forget what they mean, or give the word a meaning of our own, and when a word can mean lots of different things to different people, then it can get confusing.

So what is faith? What is it the disciples or apostles wanted more of?

It might be easier to start with what faith is not. It is not the same as belief in creeds, doctrines, or dogma. You can have faith even if you don't believe every doctrine of the church. It is not magic. Magic is something that a person can manipulate or control to produce an affect or use to get what they want. Faith doesn't work like that; it isn't something we use to control God or manipulate God to do what we want, or produce what we want to see or have.

So if faith isn't magic, and it isn't belief in doctrines, then what is it?

The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms defines faith as "belief in, trust and obedience to God as revealed in Jesus Christ..... and affects all dimensions of one's existence, intellect, emotions, and will." In other words, faith isn't only belief, it is deeper than believing, it is also trusting and obeying God with our whole being: mind, heart, soul and strength.

Lukan scholar Charles Talbert, in his book *Reading Luke*, describes faith as a response, more specifically "a personal response to God's initiative". In other words, for Talbert, faith is our personal response to God's great love for us as shown in Jesus Christ. So when the apostles in our Gospel today were perhaps saying in a back handed way that forgiving everyone who asks is impossible without more faith, Jesus reaction is to say faith isn't something that is quantitative, it isn't something you gather up or collect more of, it is something you *do* based on your relationship God. Since God forgives, then it is already possible for the apostles and us to forgive. Even if it is hard. Even if it seems impossible. We can forgive not because we are independently powerful, but because we have already been forgiven by God, and that is how God's Love works. Talbert writes that in this section of Luke's Gospel, the author is saying that all of us can do these acts of faith like forgiving simply because that is what God expects and does. No follower of Jesus has a need to ask for more faith because faith is just living into God's love, it is something to be done step by step, day by day, no matter how ridiculous or difficult or impossible it might seem. Sort of like planting daffodils in the snow.

Which might help us wrap our heads around Jesus strange story of the slave and master where it appears this man has only one slave, and it might look to us like the man in the story is expecting a lot from one person. But the point Jesus is making is the person doing the work didn't expect to be given superior status because of the work they did, they simply did the work they were expected to do. While we might be, and rightly so, uncomfortable with the use of terms like slave and master, the point Jesus was making long before slavery existed as we know it, is the worker did the work he was given without expectation of reward or advancing a career. So this isn't a story to be taken literally, it is how Jesus explained what faith is. It is a story about what faith looks like when we do any work through that lens of our belief, trust, and obedience to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. When we are living the love of God (another way of saying faith) we model the virtues of humbleness and humility.

Perhaps Jesus was responding to the apostle's demand for something more with this story to show them following him isn't about gaining rewards, status or cultural importance; as it is when a person has faith in things like money, power, prestige, appearance, hierarchies, institutions, politics, or anything that isn't God. Instead Jesus was saying following him is about living God's love in everything we say and do.

Ever see those memes that say something like "I trust God won't give me more than I can handle, but I wish God wouldn't trust me so much?" I wonder if this is the sentiment the disciples were expressing after Jesus gave them some big expectations, but what Jesus said in response is that God isn't going to give anyone more than they can handle, God loves us and gives us love, our daily bread, forgiveness, and such not so we can hold onto those things, or feel superior to anyone else, but so we can do the work God has given us to do. If the work of forgiving or praying or serving on vestry, or singing in the choir, or serving lunch, or serving as acolyte, or usher, or visiting a person in prison, or knitting prayer shawls, or helping people with their taxes, or giving away donuts and coffee the first day of classes at OU, or setting up the altar for service or cleaning up the vessels after the service, or serving on the Stewardship committee and asking for pledges, or serving on the Nominating Committee, or attending Diocesan Convention, or putting together the budget, or serving as a warden or treasurer or secretary of the vestry, or helping with Soul Biscuits, or planning worship services, organizing schedules, or pledging, or cleaning up after 2nd Sunday brunch, or writing grant requests, or learning, or listening, or teaching, or whatever work we have to do seems or feels hard or challenging, perhaps today's Gospel can serve as a reminder Jesus is calling us to faith; to love such work just

as we love God because God loves us. Perhaps nothing is really as easy as we'd like to imagine, but perhaps being easy or hard isn't really the point of having faith. Perhaps the point is to love the work as we love God and when we love our way through we'll discover something better than rewards, we'll discover God really is in our midst. Perhaps we'll even discover God is right there in the middle of the hardest, most challenging work, which makes it a holy, sacred place because that is where God doing something awesome with us. This work doesn't require a lot of faith, or advanced faith, just faith, faith we already have, faith as simple as planting daffodils in the snow.