

*A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away*, in the now iconic movie *The Empire Strikes Back*, the fifth film in the *Star Wars* saga, the hero Luke Skywalker learned a valuable lesson about faith and how it relates to size. For those of you who may be unfamiliar with this fictional galaxy, the hero was on a remote, desolate, swampy planet being taught the ways of the Force by a Jedi Master named Yoda. Jedi Masters are the good guys of the *Star Wars* universe which includes strange looking aliens of all shapes and sizes and colors. Yoda was one of those strange looking aliens; he had green skin, long, pointy ears that stick straight out of the sides of his head. He was elderly and walked with a limp, even with the aid of a cane. And he was only about three feet tall. Yet as Luke was learning, this small alien who had a weird way of mixing up words when he spoke, was one of the most powerful of Jedi. Not because of his age. Or experience. Or color. Or size. But because of his relationship with the Force.

In about the middle of the movie, Luke's spaceship sunk in the swamps of the planet and in frustration he lamented he would never get his ship out. In response, Yoda challenged him to use the Force to lift his spaceship out of the water. When Luke tried and failed, the excuse he gave Yoda was his ship was "too big". And Yoda's response is the beginning of a lesson so important it is not that different from the one Jesus gave his disciples in our Gospel today.

Yoda said to Luke, "Look at me, judge me by my size, do you? And well you should not, for my ally is the Force." The Force, Yoda explained is an energy that is both created by life and giver of life, and those who are sensitive to it can interact with it. The Jedi do so for good. Luke's response to Yoda's words were an unbelieving, "You want the impossible." Then this small Jedi master demonstrated such faith was far from impossible by lifting Luke's spaceship out of the water and levitating it to dry land, leaving Luke Skywalker to wrestle with this lesson of faith and how it has nothing whatsoever to do with size.

There are examples of such faith here in our world too. This week I was reminded of one that I experienced almost 20 years ago when I was in Ireland with a friend of mine and we visited the Aran Islands off the coast of County Galway. Instead of hopping from island to island, we decided to explore just one island, and picked the smallest one, Inisheer, because we thought we would be able to explore the entire island before it was time to move on to our next destination. And Inisheer is very small. We walked the entire island in about an hour. At most only a few hundred people live there. Besides the houses, there was only 1 pub, one hotel that was also a

hostel, 1 little general store, and the boat landing, which was one of their important forms of transportation as there was no school on the island and the children had to take the ferry to one of the other islands for school every day. There was also a cemetery and a church.

At first glance this church looked like a ruin. The plaque outside the building says, if you can read Gaelic, it dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is not a large building; probably about half the size of just our worship space. The roof and doors have long decayed away. And the church appears to be built into the ground, which may have been intentional to protect it from the storms that can hit a small island hard.

But this little, ancient church is far from ruined. It is to this very day an active place of worship. On a shelf by the altar there stood a candle lamp. This was no idle furnishing. It was a sanctuary lamp, just like the one we have in this church, there, hanging by the tabernacle. The sanctuary lamp is not a decoration. It serves a purpose. It is a light that burns all day and night every day to indicate the presence of the reserve sacrament – what we call consecrated bread and wine. We believe in some mysterious way Jesus is present in the bread and wine after the priest says the prayers of the Holy Eucharist over them, while at the very same time remains bread and wine. After we celebrate and share Holy Communion, we often put what is left into the tabernacle so that we can give Holy Communion to people who could not make it to church because of illness or being shut in.

The presence of a sanctuary lamp burning brightly means the church is still active, it is still doing what churches are intended to do: being present in its community by being a sign of the Risen Christ.

Later I learned just how powerful that little church is to its small community. During storms, the building often gets filled with sand. And the people of Inisheer carefully work to remove the sand so the building can continue to be used as a place to pray. They have regular prayer services there and on the feast day of the church's namesake, St. Cavan, a priest from the mainland comes to celebrate Holy Communion and people come from other islands and the mainland to be part of that service.

To this day I am still feeling the connection to that church. I ended up writing a research paper on it in seminary. And remembered it this week when wondering how to write an article for our newsletter. I can't help being impressed by this little church and its members who have for hundreds of years despite storms and struggles are still doing what followers of Jesus are called to do. It seems like it would be impossible in a location so remote, and so small. But its very existence is proof that is possible and my experience of finding myself in the presence of the Risen Christ in that small and remote place speaks to the power of faith.

That is what is at the heart of today's Gospel lesson where Jesus was teaching, like Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*, that size isn't a good way to judge, especially when it comes to faith. The author of Luke's Gospel begins our lesson this morning with the apostles or disciples demanding that Jesus increase their faith. Perhaps they had grown tired of the times Jesus referred to their little faith like when he calmed a storm or walked on water. Whenever they shuddered in fear, Jesus would say something about their little faith. Or maybe, in the part of the Gospel not included in today's reading, the disciples had been given a challenge they didn't think they could do, like Luke Skywalker, and demanded more because they believed bigger faith is the only way they could do something so big or different.

Whatever the reason, the disciples seemed to think the thing they needed most was more faith than they had. And Jesus response about pulling up a tree known for having a complex root system and planting in the sea is as symbolic of achieving the impossible as Yoda using the Force to lift Luke Skywalker's spaceship to dry land. It isn't size that matters, whether it is the size of the person, the size of a church, or the size of their faith. It is their relationship with God that matters.

In order to better understand today's Gospel, it helps to have a biblical definition of the word faith instead of the one found in most dictionaries where faith can mean belief, trust or loyalty. For people like Paul who wrote quite a few of the letters that are in the New Testament and the writers of the Gospels, faith wasn't the same thing as belief or loyalty. Faith is about a person's unique relationship with God. Faith implies action – it is a person's response to what God starts or initiates. Faith is not like magic; it isn't doing something we believe God wants us to do so that God will respond by doing what we want. That is a different kind of relationship.

Faith is a deeper relationship that requires a bit more letting go of our expectations and becoming a living response to God's gifts of life, forgiveness, mercy, and love. That is what Jesus was most likely referring to in the last lines from today's Gospel. It's easy to miss that because we might want Jesus to use different words than slavery and worthless; we'd probably prefer Jesus to condemn slavery and remind us of our value as beloved children of God. But most scholars agree when we can set our prejudices aside, Jesus was describing a relationship of faith, where people do what needs to be done not to get praise or recognition, but simply because they were the tasks that needed to be done.

In a few moments, we will confess our sins and receive forgiveness from God. The faithful response of being forgiven is to forgive others. To show how forgiveness is the balm that can heal anger and pain is one of the main ways we can work with God

to make the Kingdom of Heaven more present here and now. This is not easy, for some it may seem impossible, but it is possible, not because of our strength, but because God has already forgiven us.

This is just one example. There are other ways we are challenged to respond to God's love for us. A few years ago, we were challenged by the Bishop and his staff to do so by starting a new ministry that positively impacts the local economy in ways that demonstrate our faith as followers of Christ. Some of us responded to this challenge by saying it was impossible. That we are too small, that opening up our building would make us too vulnerable, that we didn't have enough resources. With prayer and study and faith we over came those feelings of inadequacy and didn't start just one ministry, we started two: CrossRoads Café and the Thrift Shop.

This is the same kind of faith that touched me almost 20 years ago in Ireland. Faith that proves it isn't size that matters and cautions us against mistaking the small as the same thing as insignificant. While might feel jealous of those churches that are bigger and newer, we have to be careful not to get stuck judging faith that way. In the end, the Kingdom of God isn't made real by the biggest show, it is made real by the small, everyday acts of faith, whether its sweeping sand from a 10<sup>th</sup> century church, sharing Holy Communion with each other, paying it forward at our coffee shop, serving on vestry, or the altar guild, mowing the church lawn, pledging, participating in worship, serving a free lunch, or any of the ways we are present to our community by sharing the love God has given us. Our size matters not, no one need judge us by our size, nor do we need to judge ourselves by our size, for we are sensitive to the Holy Spirit in our midst, we are loving God with our whole selves and striving to love our neighbors and with God we are being Present and that is no insignificant thing.