

Measure of faith: 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

by [John Rollefson](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

An emphasis on the decision character of faith has a long and deep history in the American psyche going back to our Puritan and evangelical ancestors. From Jonathan Edwards to Charles Finney to Billy Sunday through Billy Graham and their successors, faith, as encountered in the idiom both of born-again revivalism and of religious “progressives,” has served as shorthand for “I have decided to follow Jesus.” But the biblical meaning of faith cannot be reduced to individualistic voluntarism.

Earlier this summer we were reminded that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.” Then followed a whole family tree of Israel’s forebears for whom faith in God was identified as their common DNA, the connecting thread of their family history. Sinful and sordid as much of that story turned out to be, Israel’s faith was never a “lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps” kind of willfulness. Faith was to live life by entrusting oneself to God’s promises, the storied Word of a trustworthy God.

The author of 2 Timothy sees faith similarly in its family connection as “lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice,” a faith which only then can be said to “live in you.” Yet this is no mere family hand-me-down but a “gift of God that is within you” and “a good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” Faith is an incarnate reality that, while a gift from God, is one that comes embodied in our human, including family, relationships.

This reminds me of an old story which has meant a great deal to me as I try to comprehend and communicate the mystery of how one comes to faith. Scottish theologian Donald Baillie tells the parable in *The Theology of the Sacraments*, published posthumously nearly half a century ago. “Let us imagine,” Baillie begins,

. . . the case of a small child, a little boy, entrusted to the care of a nursery governess. When she arrives, the little fellow is taken into the room where she is, and left in her care. But she is strange to him, he does not trust her,

but looks distantly at this strange woman from the opposite corner of the room. She knows that she cannot do anything with him until she has won his confidence. She knows she has to win it. The little boy cannot manufacture it, cannot make himself trust the governess. His faith in her is something which he cannot create—only she can create it.

And she knows that she cannot create it by forcing it; she has to respect the personality of the child; and to try to take the citadel by storm would be worse than useless, and would produce fear and distrust instead of confidence. . . . She sets about her task gently, using various means—words, gestures, and smiles, and perhaps gifts, all of which convey something of the kindness of her heart. Until at last the little fellow's mistrust is melted away, she has won his confidence, and of his own free will he responds to her advances and crosses the floor to sit on her knee. Now that her graciousness, using all these means, has created his faith, she can carry on the good work she has begun.

No human analogy, Baillie admits, can adequately plumb the mystery of how one comes to faith. But this “very simple and homely illustration,” as he calls it, old-fashioned as it may be, illuminates how faith is always God's gift and never our human accomplishment. Faith is ever and only a response empowered by an amazing grace originating from outside of our own efforts that enables us to entrust ourselves willingly to One we have found trustworthy. In Baillie's understanding, it is especially through the word and sacraments that God bestows these faith-creating gifts.

Our Gospel text addresses another pastoral issue regarding faith that is still very much with us: whether the degree and depth of our faith are adequate to life's circumstances. The concern here is voiced by Jesus' own followers whom he sternly commands to beware of causing little ones to stumble, but also to be generous in extending forgiveness even to chronic sinners who continue to repent. For once, “the apostles,” as Luke calls them, seem to have grasped the difficulty of what Jesus is teaching and plead with him: “Increase our faith!” Jesus replies rather obliquely, “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.” Apparently faith isn't about capacity; it is an orientation. Faith is beyond measurement. You've got it or you don't, Jesus goes on to suggest. Having it is being like the slave who simply does what is commanded, who knows his or her place and does what needs doing.

I often quote a quip attributed to Archbishop William Temple: "It is a great mistake to think that God is chiefly concerned with our being religious." I think Jesus would agree, since he pricked the balloon of his followers' own religious pretensions about faith. Faith is not a matter of pious exertion or heroic will power. But rather, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer testified in his prison poem "Who Am I?," faith is the miracle of God-given trust, that willingness beyond willfulness that crawls into the lap of a trustworthy God, encouraging one to conclude in the face of all life's questions and circumstances: "Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am thou knowest, O God, I am thine."