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The author and theologian G. K. Chesterton once said “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.” He said this because he found most Christians, including himself, did not put their faith into action. But even Chesterton would agree there was a notable exception.

“Francis of Assisi, the saint who launched a million birdbaths, hundreds of thousands of statues, and the occasional service of Blessing of the Animals was, for Chesterton, the one Christian who actually lived the Gospel.

Francis was the son of a wealthy textile merchant and as such part of the new Italian middle class that was coming into its own. His father’s wealth and Francis’ own natural charisma made the young man a leader of the youth of his town. Francis gained a rock-star like following by the early 1200’s. He remains famous today not because of his own words and actions so much as because his words and actions conformed so closely to those of Jesus.

As a boy Francis dreamed of earning glory in battle. He got his chance at an early age when he enlisted, along with the other young men of Assisi, to fight in a feud against a neighboring city-state. Assisi lost the battle and Francis was imprisoned for a time. Defeat in battle and serious illness in prison caused Francis to turn away from his visions of glory on the battlefield.

Francis’ path toward God took a series of twists and turns rather than an all at once conversion. However, the course of Francis’ life was profoundly changed by at least two formative experiences. On a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis saw a beggar outside of St. Peter’s Church. The Holy Spirit moved him to trade places with the beggar. Francis exchanged clothes with a beggar and then spent the day begging for alms. That experience of being poor shook Francis to the core.

Later he confronted his own fears of leprosy by hugging a leper. Like trading places with the beggar in Rome, hugging a leper left a deep mark on Francis. Shaped by his experiences with the beggar and the leper, he had a strong identification with the poor. Francis cut himself off from the opulent lifestyle of his father and sought out a radically simple life.

By the time of his death, the love of God had compelled Francis to accomplish much toward rebuilding the church. He could look on thousands of lives transformed by his call for repentance and simplicity of life. Yet, Francis of Assisi was simply a man transformed by the love of God and the joy that flowed from a deep understanding of all that God has done for us.”

Francis’ approach to his life of Christian service fits with Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed and the disciples asking how they can increase their faith. Did you know that researchers have said that we only use about 10% of our brain? I’m wondering if we are that way with our faith. Do we only use 10% of our faith? Faith is much like a muscle. If you exercise it, it will grow stronger; and if you ignore your faith, it will atrophy. God gives us the potential, plants the mustard seed within us, but it only grows as we act. There are no shortcuts, no implants, facelifts, special easy diets, pills or genetic splices that will increase your faith. The only prescription is a daily dose of being God’s willing servant and following through. If you want more faith, be faithful.

Jesus sounds kind of put out with the disciples, and what he is saying is, I am tired of these excuses--use the faith that you already have. For the disciples not to forgive, not to serve, not to love, not to be inclusive of everyone, not to follow Jesus when it was hard because they needed more faith would be like: a farmer who said "If I only had more seed to sow, then I would plant a crop." Or a would-be business owner who said "If I only I could build a bigger building, I would open my business." or someone who says "if I only had more money, then I would open a bank account."

There won't be more seed for the farmer until he has a harvest; there won't be a bigger building for the business owner until he uses what space he has; there won't be more money until that person starts to save what they can now; and we won't grow in faith until we use what faith we have.

If we simply use the faith God has given us, we wind up growing in faith and we find that impossible-looking things – things like forgiveness and love and inclusiveness—are not impossible after all. We find the problems we face may look like mountains and seem like they just cannot be defeated, but with just a "little dab" of faith, just a mustard seed's worth of faith, they can be uprooted and thrown out. It only takes a small opening for God to work. When we are willing to be used by God in small ways, our faith grows. It doesn't take a lot of faith. It does take a willingness to use what faith we have.

A little faith can go a long way. And so often it is the small things that are important. We have been given the gift of faith and it is ours to care for. Jesus wants us to focus on what we CAN accomplish with the faith we have, regardless of the size. It is so easy to surrender to the struggles of life believing that we don't have what it takes to endure but the reality is we do have what it takes in the exact measure we need.

G.K. Chesterton advised, "Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair." That was Francis, living out a love affair with God. When it is me and you living into the love of God, then Christianity will have been tried and not found wanting.

Jesus ends the Gospel today with a challenge to never do simply what we think we can do, or should be doing, but to always push the limits of our personal faith in order that we do more than what we see as possible given the circumstance. When we take the time to reflect upon what we have been through we know we are ready for whatever life holds. We are called to do more than is asked of us with a faith that has far more potential than what we could ever imagine. So, even though our faith may be tiny as a mustard seed we have been made stewards of it and we CAN accomplish great things with it. Amen.