

Back in 1944, Joseph Heller was a bombardier pilot in the US Air Force, serving in Mediterranean Theater of North Africa and Italy during World War 2. But most people know Joseph Heller less from his military service and more as the author who penned the hysterical satire, *Catch-22*, which tells the story of combat pilots during World War 2. You can see where he found his inspiration pretty easily. Incredibly enough, the title itself has become a staple in American language, even leaving some to conclude, “Joseph Heller gave us a word we didn’t know we needed.” Even if you haven’t read the book, chances are you’ve heard the phrase before.

The way Heller describes it, any combat pilot who willingly wants to fly more missions is deemed insane, which would be reason to ground them from flying more combat missions. But in order for this to happen, the pilot must request to be grounded by reason of insanity. However, the minute that you request to be grounded, you reveal that you are a sane, rational human being, and thus fit to fly more dangerous combat missions. That’s the *Catch-22*, in all of its circular and maddening logic. It is a frustratingly impossible situation.

Just prior to this reading today, Jesus gives the disciples two commands in order to live as his followers: 1) do not get in the way of someone else’s discipleship journey and 2) endlessly forgive those who ask for it. It’s to these things that the disciples reach what seems to be their breaking point, when they cry out, “Increase our faith, Lord!” and you get the sense that it all feels overwhelmingly too much. They’ve given up a lot in following Jesus and, if we give them the benefit of the doubt, they’ve actually been pretty open to what Jesus expects of them. But the deeper they get into this discipleship business, the more it feels they just aren’t good enough, they aren’t strong enough, and they don’t believe enough. And so they plead for more faith.

Which is actually a common trope, not only in ancient Israel, but in our world today. How often has it been thought or even said out loud, “If you just believed more...” – fill in the blank. If you just believed more, God would heal you. If you just believed more, God would answer your prayers. If you just believed more, you would be more successful. All of which imply what the disciples, and perhaps you and me, fear most: that we will always fall short. And that if we fall short, we will have failed. And if we fail, God might be mad at us and not love us anymore, or, what always feels worse, God will be very disappointed. But deep down I think we know and understand that that kind of thinking isn’t true. Faith cannot be measured or quantified and God doesn’t reward, punish, or withhold because one has supposedly more faith than another.

And just as the disciples are in this place of feeling woefully inadequate for the task of discipleship, Jesus drops some more news on them. When you do what is expected, when you do your job as a disciple, when you love God and love your neighbor as yourself, don’t expect to be rewarded for that. In other words, we can’t go above and beyond for God because we could never exceed the goodness and faithfulness of God. And so even if we did all that was expected of us, even if we were able to live the way God intends and do that perfectly, we will be deserving of as much praise as we get for getting dressed in the morning. It’s just what’s expected.

Let’s review. With faith the size of a mustard seed, we could do miraculous things like love God, love our neighbors, and forgive someone as many times as it takes. But if we’re being honest with ourselves, we don’t always do that very well and so it would be natural to cry out, “We need more faith!” Except, according to Jesus, faith is not something you quantify, it’s not something you consume or accumulate more of because there is no leveling up in discipleship. In other words, we want more faith because we know that we do not always do the things we’re supposed to do. And even if we could do all of those things, it wouldn’t earn us more love, more faith, more anything because it’s the bare minimum for life as a disciple of Christ. Are you getting a *Catch-22* vibe here?

And if you are like me and you want to throw up your hands and cry out, “This is impossible, Jesus!”, just know that you get it. It is impossible. That’s the point. You and I will never have enough faith because faith isn’t measurable. You and I will never do all that is expected of us because we all fall short like that. But if we have a faith, even a faith as small as a mustard seed – a grain-of-sand-sized confidence in God, miraculous things happen in this world. You see faith lies not in what we can do, but in what God in Christ can and does do. In other words, what we have here in this gospel passage might be what we call, “The *Grace-22*.” We will never do enough, be enough, or believe enough. It’s impossible. The catch is that we don’t have to. Because grace reminds us that Christ has done everything already. The life of Jesus, the love of Jesus, and the faith of Jesus are sufficient for people like you and me who so desperately want the world to be transformed into the Kingdom of God and who are incapable of willing it to happen. God’s got this. We’re just doing what we can along the way, always remembering that it is Christ who upholds us and all others in and through all things. And when we fall short, let’s remember the grace of Christ is sufficient. It’s best there is. Thanks be to God! Amen.