

## Proper 22C 2019 Sermon

### *Luke 17:5-10*

*The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "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.*

*"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"*

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

That's an interesting way to begin a Sunday lectionary reading! Oh, it's not that the request *itself* is difficult to understand – who among us would **not** like to increase our faith? But one has to wonder what it is that *occasioned* this heart-felt cry for more faith.

In the verses leading up to today's passage, Jesus gives strong instructions on how his followers are to behave toward one another. He tells them that they should never cause the "little ones" to stumble. Who are "the little ones"? Fr. John Shea explains: "the 'little ones' are those who have just begun their spiritual development and are not yet mature in the faith. They are the weakest; and they must be attended to in such a way that they grow and become strong. They should not be stepped on or stepped over. [And] as if this deference toward 'little ones' were not enough, Jesus also [tells his followers] they must be endlessly ready to forgive whoever offends them.

"This must have shocked them to the core. It is social foolishness and goes against the primal instinct to protect and defend oneself. *Revenge* and *retaliation* are the accepted way [of our culture]. These *new* behaviors of deference and forgiveness may be hallmarks of the kingdom of God, but they are unrealistic fantasies in the world where most people live.

"The apostles are not ready for this way of life, and they do not think they can carry it out. Whatever resources they have are not sufficient for the task. So, they ask for more. They need a power that will enhance their ability to be sensitive to the weak and to live without harming others and to forgive whatever harm is done to them. In their minds they need an increase of faith."<sup>1</sup> And why not ask Jesus for this? People came to Jesus and asked for *healing*, and he healed them. When his disciples ask him for increased faith, why would he not give it to them?

Yet, he does not. Instead, he tells them, “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.”

Now I must say that, for years, I thought that Jesus, in saying this, was *chastising* his disciples – and by extension, you and me – for not having enough faith. I would read this passage and think to myself, “My faith must be smaller than a mustard seed, then! For I *certainly* don’t have the power to speak to a tree and have it uproot itself and be planted in the sea!” But then, I don’t know *anybody* who has that kind of power; and I have known some people of **great** faith! Which means that I have probably not been interpreting this passage correctly.

I *now* see that what Jesus is doing in saying that faith the size of a mustard seed can uproot trees and plant them in the ocean is exactly the *opposite* of **chastising** them for having too little faith: rather, he is telling them, in effect, “You don’t need more faith. Just the tiniest bit of faith can accomplish the work of God’s kingdom; you already **have** enough faith for God to use you to accomplish his will. Recognize it; claim it; and act on it!” Jesus’ statement is not *chastisement*, then, but **encouragement**! Fr. Shea writes: “Faith results from people opening to and responding to **God’s** initiating action. This allows them to cooperate with divine energy and to bring about the world God envisions. Therefore, faith is not about unaided human powers. It is about human abilities in league with divine intentions and activity.”<sup>2</sup> Faith is not about unaided human powers. It is about human abilities joined with divine intentions and activity. God only needs a tiny opening in our hearts – about the size of a mustard seed – and God can work in and through us to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven. And by “kingdom of heaven,” I mean that realm in the here and now wherein God’s will is done on earth as in heaven.

We can see a similar dynamic at work in the Gospel story of the feeding of the multitude (Mark 6:30-44). In that story, you may remember, Jesus spends all day teaching a large crowd of people, and as night approaches, the disciples tell Jesus to send the crowd away, so that they might go to the local villages and buy something to eat. Jesus responds, “*You* give them something to eat.” But they protest, “Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to the crowds to eat?” The disciples immediately focus on their *lack* of ability and resources to feed the people, just as they focus in *today’s* Gospel on their *lack* of enough faith. Fr. Shea remarks:

“When the disciples confront new situations and are asked to respond out of their personal resources, they immediately sense they *lack what they need* and look **outside** themselves for help. Jesus does not honor this instinctive move [to the outside]. Instead, he directs them **inside** [themselves] and asks them to reappraise what they might bring to the situation. Jesus sees more in his followers than they see in themselves. He is continually urging them to reconceive who they are and

what they can do. They must include faith among the resources they have, and be able to access it.”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps what Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel is that true faith isn’t something that is scarce and huge and only attained by the great saints of the Church. Faith is usually **not** heroic. And yet, the results of our little acts of faith, opening our hearts to God’s Spirit just a little bit, can add up over time and among the many communities of the body of Christ (like our own community of Christ Church) such that the results are without measure.

We have been reading through the Gospel of Luke each Sunday for the past 10 months. Think of those times in Luke’s Gospel when Jesus notices or commends people for their faith. What are they doing to warrant such recognition or praise? A woman has faith that if she can only touch Jesus’ robe, she will be healed (8:43-48). A centurion has faith that if Jesus just speaks the word, his sick servant will be healed (7:9). A woman has faith that she has been forgiven, and in gratitude for that forgiveness, she anoints Jesus’ feet with her tears (7:36-50) and wipes them with her hair. “And so it shouldn’t surprise us,” writes Dr. David Lose, “that [in the second part of today’s Gospel reading] Jesus challenges the disciples’ perception about faith by pointing them to the far-from-illustrious or noteworthy hard work and service of a servant performing his duties. Faith is found... in the ordinary and everyday acts of doing what needs to be done, responding to the needs around us, and caring for the people who come our way.”<sup>4</sup> Given an opening the size of a mustard seed, God’s Spirit can use our ordinary acts to spread divine love and light and bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth.

“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed,” Jesus says, “you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” Jesus is using hyperbole, of course; but his point is that we **DO** have faith the size of a mustard seed, so we *can* open ourselves to God working through our ordinary, everyday lives to build his Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.

So, think for a moment: What ordinary, everyday task have you performed this past week that was an act of faith? I believe that if we totaled all such acts of faith done by members of our congregation in the spirit of Christ’s love this past week, we can begin to see that, *without* those acts of faith, the world would have been a little less bright than it is today. And what would our world look like if each of us did one **more** ordinary act of faith in this *coming* week, and even more in the week after that, and the week after that? Pretty soon, “we would see mulberry trees marching to the sea.”<sup>5</sup>

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 278

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 279

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 281

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-20-c-every-day-acts-of-faith/>

<sup>5</sup> Shea, *ibid.*, p. 283