

Proper 22C 2016 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 remember that Luke is more careful than any of the other Gospel-writers in how he ties his stories together. So 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 the 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."¹ And why not ask Jesus

for this? People had come 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?

But 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 do miraculous things. And you **have** enough faith to do great things. 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."² God only needs a tiny opening – about the size of a mustard seed – and God can work in and through us to bring about the Kingdom.

This positive interpretation is affirmed in the second part of today's Gospel, wherein Jesus tells his followers that a slave who has worked in the field all day doesn't come home and expect his master to say, "Ah, you've done such extraordinarily hard work! Sit down at the table and eat." No, if part of the slave's job is also to fix dinner, he should do that, without any great fanfare. And Jesus' followers should have the same mindset. Fr. Shea writes: "[The Disciples'] nature is to serve, and they must be diligent about it. Looking for reward and thanks is not appropriate because it will continue the false consciousness that they are doing something so far beyond the ordinary that they have to be specially acknowledged. In the kingdom of God abundant service is not extraordinary. It is just how things are."³

Jesus' words in today's Gospel work to assure his disciples that "what they perceive as requiring extravagant effort is within their reach. They do not need *more*; they need confidence in what they *have*. They should not portray Jesus' new possibilities of human behavior as only available to heroic efforts they cannot accomplish. It is simply service as usual."³

A similar dynamic occurs in the story of the feeding of the multitude (Mark 6:30-44). As you recall, Jesus spends all day teaching the crowd. 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. Instead, he directs them **inside** 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.”⁴

Perhaps what Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel is that true faith isn’t something that is huge and scarce and only attained by the great saints of the Church. Faith is **not** usually heroic, but rather is – in the words of Professor David Lose – “simply and humbly doing what needs to be done, big or small, great or mundane, just because it needs doing.”⁵ Going into the fields to work, coming home to serve supper. Ordinary stuff; but the results of such little acts of faith, especially when added up over time and among the communities of the body of Christ, are without measure.

Think of those times in Luke’s Gospel (which we have been reading this year) when Jesus commended people for their faith. What were they doing to warrant such praise? A woman was desperately confident that if she could only touch the hem of Jesus’ robe, she could be healed (3:48). A centurion was concerned for his sick servant (7:9). A woman was grateful for being forgiven (7:50). In the next several weeks, we will hear Jesus call “faithful” a Samaritan leper who returns to thank him for healing (17:19) and the plea of a blind beggar for sight (18:42). “And so it shouldn’t surprise us,” writes Dr. Lose, “that 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 not in the mighty acts of heaven but 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.

“...Listening when someone needs to talk. Getting the kids off to school. Sitting with someone in the cafeteria who looks like they could use a friend. Volunteering at [Mercy Today, CASA, or Loaves and Fishes]. Voting, even if the field of candidates seems discouraging. ... Writing a thank you note to someone who has done a kindness. Cooking supper. Praying for a neighbor who is having a hard time. The list could go on. And that’s the point. None of these is any big

deal, and yet it is just these kinds of acts that occupy so much of our lives. And I suspect it wouldn't cross the minds of most of [you] that they are acts of faith.”⁵

“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.” And Jesus’ point is that you DO have faith the size of a mustard seed, so you *can* open yourself to God doing in you those ordinary, everyday things that nonetheless build the Kingdom on earth as in heaven.

So think for a second: What ordinary, everyday task have you performed this past week that, upon reflection, was an act of faith? If we totaled all such acts of faith done by members of our congregation 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.

AMEN

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

² *ibid.*, p. 279

³ *ibid.*, pp. 280-281

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 281

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-20-c-every-day-acts-of-faith/>

⁶ *ibid.*