

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 6, 2019
Luke 17:5-10

It has gotten to the point where I almost dread picking up the newspaper, turning on the radio or tv, or reading news online. Every day, I am overwhelmed with bad news about the state of the world: the climate crisis; the persistent drumbeats of war; epidemics, famine, and systemic poverty; weather disasters; economic and political instability; and so on. And I wonder, who am I to take on these problems? What difference can I possibly make? How can any one of us change this tidal wave of misery? The problems often seem insurmountable and to require far more resources than any one of us currently possess.

To be sure, the problems we face this day are big – they are important, and thorny, and complicated. I suspect they require more than our most earnest efforts at solving them... they may require nothing less than the collective transformation of our very hearts. They require radical repentance; a new orientation. The wholehearted turning in a new direction for our sense of identity and our source of wholeness and joy. The problems of today require nothing less than faith. O Lord, increase my faith!

Our lesson today from the Gospel of Luke is about the power of just a little bit of faith. It opens with the disciples asking Jesus to increase their faith, to which Jesus replies that even their little faith – faith even the size of a mustard seed – has the power to transform. Luke prefaces this mustard seed saying with two very demanding lessons for his disciples.

In the previous four verses, Jesus instructs his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent’, you must forgive.” (Luke 17:1-4; NRSV)

The first saying is a warning against temptation to sin against another in the community of faith and the second is an instruction to forgive the one who sins against you. And in response to this charge of persistent fortitude and endless forgiveness, it is no wonder the disciples ask for greater faith. “Lord, increase our faith!” they implore. By placing these sayings of Jesus together with our lesson today, Luke has linked forgiveness and faith. The disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith because they need it to forgive, for without the faith to forgive, the disciples are in danger of becoming occasions of stumbling blocks for others. And while it takes faith to forgive, this is the disciple’s duty, as it is the slave’s duty to do as ordered.

This kind of faith is not one that comes as a result of some self-improvement project – no seven steps to greater faith – for true faith and its growth cannot be gained through human efforts. Yet, and here is the very good news, if this faith is a gift from God from whom nothing is impossible, then we should be confident that what we have been given will be enough. Which is why, when the disciples are overwhelmed by Jesus’s instructions and ask for greater faith, Jesus responds to the disciples by asking them, “Why? You do not need more faith. You already have all that you need. Even this much faith is enough.” Jesus gives the disciples not a reprimand for their lack of faith, rather an affirmation that they already have all they need to live as God desires, should they choose to do so.

But so often, this text – and the corresponding one in Matthew’s Gospel – gets co-opted in support of crude and sometimes harmful theologies of faith. Especially when read literally, it can distort faith into a kind of magic – Faith can uproot trees! Faith can move mountains! If only I had enough faith, I could do anything! I believe one of the surest signs of us creating a god in our own

image is when we warp and confuse religion with a self-serving magic that tempts us with control and power over God. So, let's be clear that in this text Jesus does not mean to conflate faith with magic. When he says that if the disciples had faith even the size of a mustard seed they command a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea, he is speaking in metaphor.

What Jesus *is* saying is that faith is not, fundamentally, something we quantify. The issue here is not about *quantity* of faith but faith's inherent *sufficiency*. Faith "the size of a mustard seed" is sufficient for even the most demanding tasks of discipleship. The mustard seed was known both for its miniscule size and for the contrastingly large and unruly bush that it rapidly produced. It was therefore the perfect metaphor for small beginnings leading to big results. But again, the point of Jesus' metaphor is not to quantify faith as much as to affirm its power. As one theologian writes, "God works through a modicum of faith to empower us to forgive even the most annoyingly repetitive sinners."

The key to this story is that the faith to which Christ refers is not *my* faith or *your* faith, but rather the faith of Christ. This is the God-given *gift* of faith that lies deep within us. This faith is efficacious not because we *work* at growing it rather it is efficacious because of the *source* of the faith. It is God's faith – and faith from that source, even if the size of a mustard seed, is powerful enough to transform our hearts and our world.

In our second lesson this morning, Paul writes to Timothy about such a God-gifted faith. In it, he writes: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love." Paul continues to write, "Hold to...the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us." For Paul, this living "in Christ" means we are living in Christ's faith and love and it is this faith that activates and magnifies the holy gift of faith already resident within us. What we should ask for is not more faith, but that the little faith we already have be bound to Christ's faith, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

It turns out that faith is not really something that can be measured. It is not significant the *size* of faith but what you *do with it*, for even little faith is enough to change the world. Faith as small as a mustard seed is sufficient to transform our hearts and lives to follow Christ. And faith as small as a mustard seed has the power to take each of our individual small works of grace and turn them into something more glorious and transformative than we could ever imagine. Asking for more faith in order to live lives as God desires is asking for the wrong thing. Instead, perhaps we should concern ourselves only with finding and putting to use the God-given spark of faith that we already possess and trust in its powerful and transformational efficacy.

This broken and fragile world is full of suffering, and so often the problems seem so insurmountable and complex that there doesn't seem to be any way that our individual efforts can make a difference. I can't speak for you, but I know that I frequently feel I do not have faith enough to live and do as Christ calls us. There are times I ask myself: How much faith must I have to follow Jesus? How much faith is needed to love the way he teaches? How much faith does it take to be able to see the Kingdom of God Jesus promises us is in-breaking in this world even now? And at these times, I cry out to God, "Lord, increase my faith!" And to my doubts and my pleas, Jesus responds: *What little faith you already possess is enough. What little faith you have is powerful. Because the little faith you have is mine, and my faith will transform the world.*

Amen.