

Pastor's Message – 10/2/2022  
Luke 17:5-10

Suppose a group of one hundred people were given the task of moving a piece of stone weighing thirteen tons one-half mile up a vertical cliff. To add to the challenge, the people are not allowed to use any tools save their hands, arms, legs, and backs. Could they do it? Impossible.

But ants could. When confronted with a dead bee or other insect, many times their body size and weight, ants crawl underneath and attempt to move the potential food source back to the nest. If it is too heavy, the ants will work together, sometimes involving hundreds of ants, to achieve their goal of carrying the bee home.

The mustard seed produces a great tree, tiny ants accomplish seemingly impossible tasks, and ... faith moves mountains.

When the disciples cry out to Jesus in Luke 17:5, "Increase our faith!" it sounds very much like a request for the ability to do the impossible. The apostles get right to the heart of the matter as if they are ordering it at the drive-through window.

Because of how small mustard seeds are, we tend to hear this repeated metaphor as a comment on the *quantity* of faith one possesses. Yet it's unlikely that's the intended meaning in any of these usages, and it's especially not the case here where Jesus responds to the apostles' request for more faith. In this setting, where the comment appears right before Jesus' parable of the dutiful servant, the point seems to be that the apostles' need is not for more faith, but for redirecting what faith they have toward dutiful service to God and perseverance rather than grand exploits.

In Luke 17, Jesus tells the story of a slave who comes into his master's house after a day of working in the field. Jesus asks if the master would immediately reward the slave with a place at the dinner table, or if he would be more likely to say to the slave, 'Prepare my meal . . . and serve me while I eat. Then you can eat later.' The apostles know that the slave is not going to rest until his work is done both outside and inside the house, and that the slave is certainly not going to be thanked for simply doing what is commanded (vv. 7-9).

If Jesus were telling this parable today, he'd probably substitute "your employee" for "your servant," but the point would be the same: Does your servant deserve thanks for doing what's expected of him? Does your employee deserve thanks for giving you eight hours of work? In the parable, the implied answer is clearly "No," and Jesus then turns the story on the disciples who are seeking more faith, saying, "In the same way, when you obey me, you should say, 'We are unworthy servants who have simply done our duty.'"

I came across a story as I was preparing my sermon for this week about a man named John. Now, John was a faithful Christian, but he had one problem, one vice in his character, that, try as he might, he could not seem to get rid of. He prayed fervently and daily, asking God that this vice may be taken away from him, so that he might be holy as God is holy.

One day, Jesus appeared to John in a vision. He told John of a huge boulder lying in a forest near where John stayed. Jesus told John to go to the boulder and push it with all his might. When the vision ended, John did exactly what he was told. He went into the forest, found the boulder just as he had been shown. John leaned his weight against it and pushed with all his might. But nothing happened. The boulder didn't even budge. And John was disappointed. It was late, so he decided to go home and try again the next day.

The next day, he went to the boulder again and pushed, and he pushed, and he pushed. But still nothing happened. After many days of pushing the boulder and not moving it, John brought this matter to prayer. "Why, Lord?" he asked. "Why can't I move the boulder?"

Jesus appeared to John again in another vision and the Lord said, "I never asked you to move the boulder. All I asked of you is that you push it with all your might."

And John finally understood. It was not so important for John to be rid of his vice, but it was more important that John made efforts to renounce this vice. Whether he succeeded or not was not important. What was important was that he tried.

There's a terrible story – and I promised not to tell where I got it -- of a terrible flood which left a mother and her son perched on the top of their home, looking down on the water seven feet deep. Then they noticed a large hat floating by. But inexplicably, when the hat reached the edge of their property, it began to float the other way. This happened three or four times. Then Mother said, "Oh, Son, I know what that is. That's your dad. He said he was going to mow the lawn today come hell or high water."

Is that the kind of Christian you are? Many, inside and outside of the church, confess, "I believe in God; Jesus is my Savior," and have no faith even as large as a mustard seed. They pray only in crises; they seldom attend worship; they give of their leftovers, rather than their first-fruits; they complain about what they don't like; they stand for nothing and fall for everything, including the latest fads; they even say, "I did my time in church work, it's time for the young people to take over." Does any of this sound familiar?

Depending on where you are from or where you've travelled, you may or may not be familiar with mustard weed. If you're familiar with the Southern U.S., you might know about kudzu. In the Midwest, it might be pokeweed or purple

loosestrife. Along fence rows, maybe it's mulberry bushes. When I lived near Westfield, there was buckthorn in the yard. All of these spread rapidly and almost uncontrollably. Few today would intentionally plant any of these in their fields, much as few in Jesus' day would ever intentionally plant mustard weed, but that's the kind of faith that Jesus is talking about: the faith that grows uncontrollably.

It's not about how much faith we have or how big that faith is. We need only to believe we have been given all the faith we need. Faith is powerful and present to those who will accept the gift. It is about our relationship with God and our trust in Jesus.

Jesus reminds us in the second part of this week's reading: He is in charge, **not** us. Faith does not spread like mustard weed if we think we've got all the strategies down just right, or if we think we control the mission and act like we do. The mission is God's, not ours. We get to help, even as we've been helped. We go and serve at the bidding of Jesus, like a family servant, not because we feel like it or because we want to make our own ministries bigger. And when the day is done, ours is to say, "We are servants of no use to anyone else. We have done your will, O God."

Mustard seed faith is grounded in obedience to Christ. Obey. Every hour. Every day. And then the next one. And the next one. And so on.

Our best efforts are just a few small steps. Nothing spectacular in themselves. But when combined with the efforts of other faithful people, they can have a powerful impact.

A number of years ago, the well-known preacher Henry Drummond preached a classic sermon titled "The Greatest Thing in the World." Drummond concluded his sermon with a bit of a school-science-project illustration. If you place a piece of iron, he said, in the presence of an electrified field, that piece of iron itself will become electrified. In the presence of that electrical field, it's changed into a magnet. As long as it remains in contact with that field of electromagnetic power, it will attract other pieces of iron to itself.

Many of us can remember how to make electromagnets, from elementary-school science class. You take an old iron nail, wrap a piece of wire around it, and attach both ends of the wire to the terminals of a dry-cell battery. In no time at all, that electrified nail is attracting all manner of paper clips, thumbtacks, and iron filings.

Is the nail itself changed? Not one bit. It's the power flowing through it that makes the difference.

That's the way it is with faith. We all have it; but every so often, we doubt that we have it. We can get all introspective, and ask ourselves, "Where's the faith? Do I still have it? Did I lose it? If so, can I find it again?"

Is it even possible to "lose" faith? It seems doubtful. Faith isn't a possession of ours in the first place. It's a spiritual power that originates with God and comes to us as a gift. What we must do, in a season of doubt, is to hook ourselves up to God's battery terminals, so the surge of spiritual energy will flow into us -- and, through us, to others.

Faith, a gift of God, though only the size of a mustard seed, can do amazing things. There's a connection, I think, to Communion today. When, coming to the Lord's table, we take into our hands a tiny morsel of bread, or drink from the cup of sacramental grape juice, it may seem like what we're holding in our hands is insignificant and inconsequential. It's ordinary stuff, that bread and juice -- no different in substance from what might sit on our dinner table at home. Yet, like the atom of hydrogen that's transformed by nuclear fusion into a blaze of power, that bread and that cup can transform our lives in astonishing ways. There is nothing magical about the material stuff of the communion elements. It's all about the power we Christians call the Holy Spirit, which activates them in our lives.

Jesus said to his disciples that a mustard-sized morsel of faith is more than enough to uproot a mighty tree and cast it into the sea. There's no telling what a cube of communion bread or a sip of communion wine can do for people of faith who come to the Lord's Table hungry and searching for what Jesus has prepared for us.

Jesus' tale of the mustard seed doesn't have to be taken as a criticism or a condemnation. It is also a word of encouragement. A mother's faith can be the seedbed for her daughter's later ministry. A faithful Sunday school teacher lays the foundation for a student's adult commitment to Christian social justice and peace. Given faith, enough faith for what God has for us to do, offers us the privilege of serving God and others. And there are opportunities in each and every day.

Someone has suggested that in our daily lives we practice "guerilla compassion" as our way of serving and living out our faith. Every day, take the opportunity to bless someone and pray for them, perhaps people in line at the bank, at the grocery, in the cars next to us in traffic. Make each blessing a tiny prayer. You won't get any thanks for doing that, but you will be blest and so will the other person. And blessing can make faith spread.