

Scriptures:

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

Faith of a Mustard Seed

Rev. Jim Somerville said “If I were making a list of all the things I wish Jesus never said, this saying about having faith the size of a mustard seed would be near the top not because its so bad but because it makes people think of faith as a quantity, as something you can have more or less of.” That means most people assume they don’t have enough and somehow they need to get more because if they had more they could move mountains, and lets be honest sometimes there are mountains to be moved. If it just required a tiny spec of faith that should be easy enough, so why is it not always possible?

In our passage today the disciples beg Jesus “Lord fix our faith.” Jesus says “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.” When I hear this passage I hear Jesus saying “Increase your faith? You don’t need more faith you only need a tiny spec.” It is not about having more faith it is about putting your faith in the right place or in the right person.

In his book “The Heart of Christianity” Marcus Borg dedicates a whole chapter to faith. He claims that in our world view (in Western Christianity) faith has become holding a certain set of beliefs. The baseline beliefs for Christians are believing there is a God, believing the bible reveals God and believing that the Jesus is the Son go God and that he died for our sins.

“Borg (who grew up Lutheran in North Dakota) acknowledges that “for some Christians the list would be longer: believing that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God; believing in Genesis rather than evolution; believing that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he walked on water, that he raised the dead, that he himself was raised from the dead in a physical bodily form, and that he will come again someday. Sometimes the beliefs become very specific, Borg writes: believing in infant baptism instead of adult baptism (or vice versa); believing in “the Rapture”; believing (or not believing) in purgatory. The list goes on and on, but as you have probably experienced for yourself believing “the right things” is very important to Christians.”¹

In our New Members group on Wednesday night we had a bit of a conversation about why there are so many denominations in one faith. We discussed how different people hold different believes and traditions either as more sacred, more true or even simply more comfortable.

The problem is Jesus was always about expanding faith rather than limiting it. The problem is all this emphasis on what the right belief is quickly turns faith into a matter of the head rather than the heart. It turns it into a set of rules rather than a life of faith.

¹ <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Jim-Somerville-Mustard-Seed-Faith.pdf>

“Back in the Middle Ages the word orthodoxy meant “right worship”; in fact, that is the literal meaning of the word. But during the Protestant Reformation it came to mean “right belief,” partly because all those Baptists, and Methodists, and Presbyterians were still figuring out what they believed. Should we baptize infants or adults? Is communion a sacrament or an ordinance? And then there was the Enlightenment which changed the way we understand truth. In the Middle Ages no one questioned the story of Jonah and the Whale. It was in the Bible: of course it was true! But during the Enlightenment people began to ask: Could there really be a fish big enough to swallow a man? And could a man really live after three days in its belly? The only truth that counted was that which could be verified scientifically; in other words, truth was replaced with fact (which is a much smaller word).

And so, after being run through the wringer of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, faith has come to mean believing the right things, and believing them no matter what, even if they are not scientifically verifiable. But it was not always so.”²

In the Middle Ages there were four different words for faith. The first word is assensus, from which we get the English word assent, and means giving one’s mental assent to a claim or proposition, that is, believing that it is true. The second Latin word for faith is fiducia, meaning trust, or “radical trust.” Fiducia is like floating in an ocean of God’s grace. In my younger years I was a lifeguard and swim instructor. Has anyone here ever tried to teach a child to swim? “What was the hardest thing about it?” Getting the child to relax and float, to trust the buoyancy of the water. Fiducia is learning to trust the buoyancy of God, and the opposite of this kind of faith is not doubt but anxiety, or worry. The third Latin word is fidelitas, fidelity, or faithfulness in our relationship to God. It means being faithful to God in the same way you might be faithful to a spouse. The opposite of this kind of faith is not doubt or disbelief, but unfaithfulness or adultery. Another biblical word for this kind of unfaithfulness is idolatry—giving one’s ultimate loyalty and allegiance to something other than God. The fourth Latin word for faith is visio. Visio is a way of seeing “the whole,” a way of seeing “what is.” And there are three ways of seeing it.

a. One is to see reality as essentially hostile, as if everyone and everything really were out to get you. Some forms of popular Christianity view reality this way, as if God himself were out to get us, and that—unless we offered the right sacrifices, or said the right prayers, or did the right things—he would.

b. The second way of looking at reality it is essentially indifferent. Someone with this view might say, “The universe is made up of swirling force fields of matter and energy, but is neither hostile to nor supportive of our lives and dreams.” And if God is the one who brought it all into being, he has long since stopped intervening or even caring.

c. The third way of looking at reality it is essentially nourishing and life- giving. It has brought us and everything else into existence. It is filled with wonder and beauty. It loves us and cares about us. This is the reality Jesus was talking about when he said, “Look at the birds of the air, the flowers of the field.” God feeds them. God clothes them. God sends his rain on the just and the unjust.

Can you see what a difference faith as visio could make in your life? What a difference there would be in seeing reality as essentially hostile, essentially indifferent, or essentially nourishing

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and life-giving? This last way of looking at reality can lead to the radical trust we talked about earlier. As Borg says, “It leads to the kind of life we see in Jesus and the saints, known and unknown. Or, to use words from Paul, it leads to a life marked by freedom, joy, peace, and love.” All of these words are relational except one. *Fiducia* describes a relationship of radical trust. *Fidelitas* describes a relationship of love and loyalty. *Visio* describes a relationship of life-giving nurture. *Assensus* is the only one that means giving our intellectual assent to a set of theological propositions and, ... that’s important. But it may not be the most important thing.

“If you have faith the size of a mustard seed,” Jesus said, “you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” And so we try to increase our faith. We try to believe more and doubt less. We try to believe things that are, frankly, unbelievable. And we do it because there are mountains that need to be moved. But what if that’s not what Jesus meant? What if he meant, “You don’t need more faith. You only need the tiniest little speck. No, it’s not about having more faith, it’s about putting your faith in the right place, or more specifically, in the right person.” Because here is the truth: that little “mustard seed” is found only five times in the Gospels. It’s mentioned twice in reference to faith, as in, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed.” But the other three times Jesus uses it he talks about how, if it’s planted in the ground, this tiny seed can become a huge bush, even a tree, in which the birds of the air can build their nests. A mustard seed, in other words, is something small that can grow big—if you put it in the ground. A few of you will remember when we started to talk about building Centrepoint we talked about having faith the size of a mustard seed and planting it. We wanted to plant our faith in such a way that it began to impact those outside our doors. We wanted to plant our faith in such a way that we were able to build a place where people felt safe, where they could be nourished, where our impact went far beyond a worship hour on a Sunday morning.

The disciples are begging Jesus to give them more faith. If it sounds like an odd request know that Jesus has just been telling them there will be times when they will need to forgive someone seventy times seven. And if you’ve ever had to do that, you probably understand the urgent nature of their request!

But Jesus says if you only had a speck of faith, you’d be able to do unimaginable things. And then he invites the disciples to consider whether servants expect to be thanked for doing what they are supposed to do. Given that the anticipated answer is probably “of course not,” we might conclude that Jesus is saying that the disciples should stop worrying about whether they have enough faith and just get to the business at hand.

Which got me thinking: might “faithfulness” simply being doing what we see needs to be done? Maybe faith doesn’t have to be heroic – going to another country to serve as a doctor or missionary. Maybe faith doesn’t even have to be particularly religious? Maybe faith is just being attentive to the needs around us and committing ourselves to doing what we can with what we’ve got, trusting that God will make use of it.

What if Jesus is trying to tell us this: that we don’t need a lot of faith, we only need the tiniest little speck. But we need to put our faith in the right place—not in ourselves and our ability to believe—but in God, the One who gives us life and nurtures it, the One who loves us like a faithful spouse, the One we can trust completely, and yes, the One who can and does move mountains.

I imagine a lot of us feel like these disciples: Overwhelmed by the demands that have been placed on you to be “good Christians,” and you not sure you are up to the task, and wondering what they signed on for. I think that is why I find most people shy away from calling themselves a disciple, even though that is in fact what you are. Faith doesn't have to be heroic.

Faith, as Jesus describes it, is just doing your job, just doing your duty, not because of any sense of reward but simply because it needs doing. Faith, in other words, is doing what needs to be done right in front of you and this, Jesus says, the disciples can already do. Folks who feel daunted by discipleship need to hear that sometimes faith can be pretty ordinary. That's what Jesus means, I think, by saying that if they had the faith even of a mustard seed, they could uproot and move a mulberry tree -- that it really doesn't take all that much faith to be, well, faithful.

Perhaps faith isn't an idea, it's a muscle and it's a relationship. And the more we use that muscle, the stronger it gets and the more we spend time in that relationship the stronger it gets.

And so Jesus tells his disciples -- both then and now -- that we've got all that we need to be faithful, and that being faithful, finally, is about recognizing all the God-given opportunities just to show up and do what needs to be done:

- doing our work
- caring for those in need
- protecting the vulnerable
- reaching out to the lonely
- befriending the friendless
- keeping the world going
- contributing to the common good.

It's all the ordinary stuff we do all the time and, taken together and blessed by God, it's pretty darn extraordinary.

Faith is putting one foot in front of the other and walking toward a future we do see yet but trust God is fashioning. Faith is heading out the door each day looking for opportunities to be God's partner and co-worker in the world. Faith is imagining that the various challenges put in front of us -- whether solving a problem at work or forgiving someone who wronged us -- are actually opportunities that invite us to grow as disciples and witness to God's presence and goodness in the world.

I keep thinking about teaching kids to swim. You watch them struggle and jump up and thrash if you dare to let go. You tell them over and over to just relax. And then finally in a beautiful moment they do it, they relax, they trust you and they trust the water and they begin to stretch out as if they are on a big water bed lifting them up. I love the moment after they first float when

they jump up eyes glistening, smiles on their face. I did it I did it and we say “yes you did” and we think to ourselves “why did you doubt?”³

³ much of this sermon is adapted from³ <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Jim-Somerville-Mustard-Seed-Faith.pdf>