

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

I confess to you now that this sermon has a disappointing lack of St. Francis in it, but I hope you will check out the Shell Newsletter article from Thursday which is all about him.

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Jesus said to 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 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.

These verses, which come right before our reading from Luke's gospel today, set the stage for the disciples cry to increase their faith. And in them, he told them unequivocally how they are to live in community and that they are accountable to one another.

Faced with that challenge, they responded, "Increase our faith!" – with an exclamation point. (They knew, after all, how hard living in community can be.)

And so, it's easy to read Jesus' response to 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* – as a rebuke, another time he scolded them for just not getting it right.

But what if that's not what he did? What if he looked at each of them earnestly and with love when they asked him for more faith? And what if he wasn't clucking his tongue and shaking his head over their lack of faith, but instead spoke those words in a voice filled with encouragement and love, as one who would give up his life for his friends?¹

If this is the case then, "*If you had faith the size of a mustard seed...*" was a way of telling his friends that they didn't need more faith, they already had enough. And what's more, he changed the question from **How much faith is enough?** to **What is faith for?** when he told them a parable about a master and a slave.

Whenever we encounter scripture references to slavery, we need to address what it means. Slavery is a problematic image for us because of our national history of race-based chattel slavery. It is important to note that slavery in Jesus' time was very different.

In Jesus' day, slavery was most often a system in which people would work as servants for a period of years before being freed. It was not based on race or ethnicity, it was not something you were born into with no hope of every escaping. It was understood to be a working relationship.

I'm not saying it was better, but we need to assert that Jesus' teaching here does not prescribe social order because passages like this have been used to do so in the past.

All of that being said, the parable Jesus taught his friends went something like this: Does a servant deserve congratulations for simply doing his job? Should she be rewarded for doing what is expected? Of course not! This is a relationship of mutual accountability and expectation – the master expects the work to be done and the servant expects nourishment, rest, and protection.²

¹ Kimberly Bracken Long, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

² Kimberly Bracken Long, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

Our relationship with one another and God are similar. To understand faith in this way is to understand faith as a way of life – and that that way is centered on living in right relationship – respecting the dignity of every human being and loving your neighbor as yourself. We are to serve God and one another, not for bonus points and not only because God expects it, but because we know God has shown us the way to abundant life.³

In other words, to question whether one has enough faith is to miss the mark. The issue at stake is how we live together. **That** is what faith is for, to help with the hard tasks Jesus outlined: How is it that we can keep from stumbling and leading one another into the valley of death? How do we manage to keep forgiving each other over and over again?⁴

A community that lives out this sort of faith is not afraid to ask questions, express doubts, or be vulnerable with one another; nor is it afraid to value mercy over fairness, or to forgive one another's failings even when patience wears thin.⁵

It is here, in this understanding of faith, that the image of the mustard seed is so much more than it first seems.

If we ask **How much faith is enough?** then the tiny pinch of holding a mustard seed means one thing.

But if we are asking **What is faith for?** then those little seeds – like Jesus – point us to something else entirely.

Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder, who lived from 23-79 C.E. (so during Jesus' lifetime) wrote an essay on mustard.⁶

³ Kimberly Bracken Long, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

⁴ Kimberly Bracken Long, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

⁵ Kimberly Bracken Long, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4*.

In a chapter titled, “Mustard, the Three Kinds of It: Forty-four Remedies,” he expounded on all the ways the plant can be used to create liniments for the stings of serpents and scorpions, and as a cure for many ailments and poisons.

It’s a common enough garden herb, and in fact it can be viewed as an invasive weed, but the mustard plant is of great medicinal value.⁷

And so when Jesus held up the mustard seed as a symbol of faith, perhaps what he was saying is our faith needs to be hardy and abundant like a weed – and that it can be used to heal and provide comfort to everyone we encounter.

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Today we launch our annual stewardship campaign in which we invite everyone to prayerfully and thoughtfully consider the ways in which they can support St. James’ in the coming year through sharing their time and talents, and a financial pledge.

Our theme this year is *Shining Our Light*. Like the image of the mustard seed, the image of shining light evokes for us that our faith is, at least in part, meant to be action. But it is also about community – the way that all of our individual lights come together here on this hilltop in Mt. Airy and shine like a beacon of hope and love.

In a few minutes during our Stewardship Moment, Senior Warden Jeannie Pellicier is going to speak more about *Shining Our Light*, and if you haven’t already done so, please pick up your stewardship envelope at the usher table.

⁶ <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D20%3Achapter%3D87>

⁷ Beth Harrison, *Reading Between the Lines* 23.6

I invite you to spend some time with the letter and other materials in it, and hope that you will join me in reflecting on what this community means to you, and pray about how you will pledge to keep it shining brightly in the year to come.

~ Amen ~