

## Increasing Faith?

Luke 17:5-10

World Communion Sunday; October 6, 2019

### **Text:**

5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 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. 7 "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'? 8 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'? 9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10 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!'"

### **Reflection:**

Fall is a beautiful season. The autumn weather is just perfect for ripening the abundant fruit and vegetables for our enjoyment. One of the highlights of the season is to attend Fall Fairs. During the summer people may have traveled to many other places, but the Fall Fair brings the rural community and the town residents, young and old, together again. Acton, Ontario, where I lived and worked, was well-known for its Fall Fair, *The Best Little Fair in Ontario*. There, I liked the exhibitions of the best corn relish or cherry pies, the prize roses, rabbits or quilts. I enjoyed meeting the town folk after the summer break. What are your memories of Fall Fairs? In our West Point Grey village, we do not have a traditional Fall Fair, but we, at West Point Grey United had our own Fall Fair. Even though there were no best roses or prize-winning sheep, we had thousands and thousands of books. I was reminded that we are living in the midst of book lovers. Beside books, we had Chinese crepes, Japanese sushi and hotdogs; it was an International Fall Fair. I enjoyed it and trust that you enjoyed it too.

Before the Fall Fair, I was told that I was responsible for the weather. How was it? It was almost perfect, as if I had ordered the perfect weather for the Fair. After three weeks of rainy days, finally we had a good weekend for it. You see, I prayed a lot for good weather. So now, can I say my prayer was answered or my good faith saved the Fair? In the spirit of today's gospel, can we say something like this? "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can block the sky to hold back the rain and keep the sunshine for the Fall Fair." Actually, the gospel puts it like this: "If you have faith the size of a mustard-seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you" (Luke 17:6). What if next year for our Fall Fair the weather is not that great? Will you blame my lack of faith and say, "increase your faith" (Luke 17:5)?

To be frank, I sometimes wish that Jesus had not said that! In fact, today's scripture is very strange and at worst misleading, even dangerous. Especially when it is understood literally, it distorts faith into a kind of magic. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the example Jesus provides "this mulberry tree" seems random within the context of the Lukan narrative. Jesus apparently points to the nearest object and dreams up the most fantastic scenario. He could just as easily have said "turn this tree into a turkey." Hmm...Maybe that would be great! We wouldn't need to buy a turkey for Thanksgiving!

Of course, Luke does not intend to conflate faith with magic. He is speaking in metaphor. But the problem is that some people read the Bible literally and may be wondering how they can increase their faith. What, then, is faith? When I was told that I was responsible for the weather, I thought it might be great if there was a certain programme such as a “Ten-steps-to-a greater-faith”? After finishing the programme, I would be able to order the weather to my liking. But there isn’t one. Why not? Faith cannot be gained by finishing degrees or attained by human effort but is given by the grace of God. Faith is not about overcoming natural laws such as the ordering of good weather.

When the disciples ask for greater faith, they already know that difficult times lie ahead of them. Jesus responds by asking for something small - a faith the size of a mustard seed. The mustard seed is known both for its miniscule size (1-2 millimeters in diameter) and its potential growth. We need only faith the size of a mustard seed. A year ago, then the 15-year-old Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, for example, began striking from school each Friday by herself, to protest climate inaction; the Friday before last in Montreal and our own Vancouver and many other towns and cities around the world, a total of 6 million people, from schoolchildren to trade unionists, have taken to the streets in global climate-crisis protests. A mustard-seed of Friday’s strike, in terms of size, now becomes giant shrubs or trees all over the world. Ms. Thunberg’s faith inspires countless people around the world to demand action and fundamental change for the good of the planet earth.

This kind of faith is not to be possessed or stowed away, but a faith to be lived out – an efficacious and active faith - sustaining others and our home we call the Earth. This kind of faith sustains God’s creation and gives life for all. This kind of faith requires responsible living.

“Increase our faith.” It may mislead our understanding of faithful living, but I understand faith to be a gift from God. It is a freely given gift of the God with whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Even though it is like a mustard seed, when we tend it, it holds God’s love and compassion. It is a miracle that faith grows, not by our own effort, but by the Holy Spirit. So, let us open our hearts to God “who has created and is creating.”

Next time when you ask for good weather. I will pray for it. If it is good I will be glad, if not I will be glad too, since we need all kinds of weather for God’s good creation. Now we are invited to the table to taste God’s good creation through bread and wine. They grew through sunshine, rain and thunderstorm, are harvested by human labour and now connect each one of us with God. So, come, come to the table of joy, love and union with God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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