

17 Pentecost Luke 17:5-10
Christ and Grace October 6, 2019
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It's October and we are already seeing change take place, as it always does, in the landscape around us. Many things change and even appear to die, but perhaps the most striking change is seen as the leaves of the trees turn brilliant, displaying God's glory in a fire of spectacular color before floating to the ground. The leaves descend on random currents of air, faithfully doing what they were made to do. They appear dead, they are dead, and yet their purpose has not ended. They decompose, returning their nutrients to the soil that will feed and strengthen the mother tree, and they will also provide a rich nursery, a seedbed, for the many seeds scattered by birds and other plants. All of this is an eternal cycle; all of this takes time.

Faith is like that. It's eternal, always there through the cycle of life, a tiny seed implanted by God in the depth of our hearts. Sometimes though, we forget about the truth of that seed of faith, the steadfast promise from God that grace will be there for us. We forget that we must practice patience, and we take things into our own hands wanting more than we have, never thinking we have enough. Perhaps the source of most of our anxiety is our fear of loss of control, fear of not having enough, fear that we cannot do all that is required of us in any given moment.

I suspect this is what the Apostles, those 12 original disciples, were feeling as they followed Jesus. In the scripture leading up to today's Gospel, Jesus has been asking some fairly extraordinary things of them – to give away their possessions, to forgive those who wrong them seven times a day - forgive the same person seven times a day if necessary, and to take up the cross. Just a few verses before our text today Jesus says to them, "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."

So it's not surprising that the disciples ask for more faith. In fact, they don't even ask very nicely, they desperately demand it – increase our faith! It appears they are anxious, overwhelmed, and feeling inadequate to the tasks around them, insufficient to the challenges, unable to imagine accomplishing any of what he is asking.

These days, don't we want to demand that Jesus give us more faith or more of whatever it is we think we need? In the world, our nation, the city of Petersburg, much is needed, never mind in our personal lives. I'm guessing some of us feel as if we need more faith...just to get through, just to get out of bed some mornings, let alone to make a difference.

So the disciples call time out. I can imagine them coming to a dead halt in the middle of the dusty road after hearing yet another impossible thing from Jesus. "If we are going to do all this then you are just going to have to give us more faith."

But Jesus doesn't respond as they expect. Instead, Jesus says something that makes them wonder if the hot sun is getting to him. 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. It's good for us to remember that Jesus is known to make points by the use of hyperbole, that is,

exaggeration that's not meant to be taken literally. His statement would have been immediately both outrageous and hilarious to the disciples. They knew how tiny a mustard seed was and no way was that enough faith for all Jesus was asking of them. They also knew a thing or two about the mulberry tree. These trees were prolific, their branches grew tall and their roots grew deep, allowing them to thrive in hot, dry conditions. It was ridiculous to think that one of these trees could be uprooted, and why in the world would anyone plant a tree in the sea. So what was Jesus saying to the disciples? What is he saying to us? Just how much faith do we need and what must we do to get it? Tell us, Jesus, because we have a lot to deal with and we are getting anxious!

Perhaps faith is not some kind of scarce resource that we need more of, need to hoard, or save. Maybe we can trust that God has already given us the faith we need and all we need do is put it into action. What if faith is simply and humbly doing whatever needs to be done, tasks big or small, great or mundane, just because they need doing?

Too often though, we want to say to Jesus, "If we are going to do all this then you are just going to have to give us more faith." Managing the resources of this church is a great example of that. It's easy to be overwhelmed by all the needs of caring for our building, providing good worship and tending to our baptismal vows to support one another in our life in Christ. We focus on what we don't have enough of, or how things are not like they used to be. Perhaps if we trust God and simply participate by faith, whether we do that with our time, talent, or treasure, we will find that God will work through us to increase our faith and our power to spread the Gospel.

Following Jesus often means just doing the next thing, trusting that God will bless it, trusting in the patient process of growth from tiny seed to great strong tree. Could it be that faith is found, not in the mighty acts of heaven, but in the ordinary and everyday acts of doing what needs to be done, responding to the needs around us, and caring for one another?

If we can understand faith in this way, then we know God is asking us to continue, to do the next thing. Following Jesus in faith means that we keep forgiving, as we trust in God's care and in God's timing. We practice patience and gratitude as we develop trust that God is in control. Like the seed and the mulberry tree we are called to be faithful, called to fulfill God's purposes for us. In our own lives that might look like caring for an aging parent, sitting with someone in the cafeteria who looks like they could use a friend, serving lunch at the Hope Center, or driving someone to a doctor's appointment. These acts of faith are all part of a larger process.

As we enjoy the change of seasons, can we have faith that God will be with us as we, like the seeds, push through the heavy dark soil to find the light? As we, like young saplings, forgive those surrounding us when they bump into us or restrict our roots, in their own need to grow? Can we forgive and continue on the path of growth God has for us, trusting that we need not all grow at the same speed?

Do we know when to reach for the sunlit sky, when to sway in the wind of the Spirit, and when to produce the bright green, almost fluorescent foliage of new growth? Do we know to spread our branches, offering our deep green leaves as shade to those who are hot and tired, working beneath us? Do we know how to let our light shine in brilliant array of color, not competing with one another but working to blend together with the other trees to create a landscape of holiness?

And then finally, do we know how to let go? Do we know that God has given us all the faith we need to be exactly who we were created to be, all the faith we need to trust that God's plan is the best plan? And when we let go, will we delight in the journey, admiring all the leaves around us as we float toward our resting place, resting in the heart of God until it's time for the next journey?

What of our lives are the seedlings, tiny and full of hope, and what are the mulberry trees, wise and strong, blazing yellow in the sun? What is our work to be done and how will we display God's glory as we go about our lives, faithfully doing what we have been created to do? Amen.

Grateful for inspiration on my porch, and from David Lose <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-20-c-every-day-acts-of-faith/>