

**Gospel Reading****Luke 17:5-10**

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 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.

"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'? 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'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 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!'

*Mustard seed faith*

Over the past four weeks, Jesus has been saying very difficult things to his disciples and to us. Jesus has told us confounding parables. It is beginning to sound very confusing and impossible to be a follower of Jesus: we have to hate our family, we have to eat with sinners, we have to commend the dishonest steward, we have to care for the beggar on the street or we will burn in Hades... It is no wonder that the disciples finally cry out to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" It is the only way we are going to get this stuff right. We need more faith if we are going to follow you Jesus; it is getting too difficult to keep up.

The disciples don't want to get it wrong. They don't want to look foolish. They want to be good at following Jesus. They want to be successful in their discipleship. I think we can all relate to that. When we care deeply about something we are doing, we want to do it perfectly. In school we strive to be the best student, complete all assignments and pass the test with flying colors. In work we want to excel, exceeding expectations and feeling the satisfaction of a job well done. In our relationships we want to live in harmony, surrounded by love and understanding, with vows that last a lifetime. In our faith, we want no less than to successfully divine the will of God and never be plagued by doubt and uncertainty.

I know that I am experiencing this human desire to *get it right* here at St. Mark's as your new rector. Yesterday, a group of us gathered at the New Windsor Retreat Center to reflect on New Beginnings in our lives and the life of the church. Any time I begin a new thing in my life, I am filled with excitement and eagerness to dive in at once. In this case, as a new rector, I want to learn it all, meet everybody, know everything about the community, inspire everyone to deeper faith, and get it all right, right now. Even saying it out loud, I have to laugh at myself. As I sat on a bench in the warm sun, looking out over the rolling hills and fields, I reflected that if I succumbed to my overachieving nature I would sacrifice my call to be faithfully present with St. Mark's for my desire to be skillfully proficient.

I think that the disciples are suffering from a similar confusion between presence and proficiency. They want to be successful disciples and so they ask Jesus eagerly, "Increase our faith!" How can we blame them for wanting to be good at following Jesus? When I read Jesus' response, I am reminded of something that Mother Theresa said, "God calls us to be faithful, not successful." This statement comes from the woman who founded the Missionaries of Charity and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. For over forty years she ministered to the poor, sick, orphaned, and dying in Calcutta, India and became an international icon for serving the suffering with Christ-like love and tenderness. But in her own estimation, she is not successful, only

faithful. And so Jesus tells the disciples, “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.”

He is telling them, “You don’t need more faith to be my disciples. You don’t need more than a mustard seed of faith and you can move a mulberry tree.” So, let’s take a moment and look at the two metaphors that Jesus uses. First, a mustard seed is very small. It is so tiny that it might seem like an insignificant spec if we didn’t know what it can become. Jesus uses the image of a seed for our faith because seeds are not static, they contain within them all the possibility of a wonderful plant that will look nothing like its humble beginnings. Seeds have the ability to grow into large mature plants and you don’t need a bigger seed to do it. All it takes is one small seed to grow a full and mature life of faith. The second image that he uses is a mulberry tree. I would not have thought much of this choice, except that we have a very annoying, very large, very prolific mulberry tree in our neighbor’s back yard that sends all of its branches across our deck. When the fruit ripens we are overrun with squirrels, birds, and rotting mulberries all over the deck and yard. We have attempted to prune the tree severely with a saw, climbing into the branches and hacking off entire limbs, encouraging it to grow in a different direction. But the more we attack it the stronger it gets. Mulberry trees have extensive root systems and are incredibly hearty. If Sean and I cannot get the mulberry tree to obey us with implements of destruction, the idea that a mustard seed of faith could take on a full grown mulberry is ridiculous.

But for Jesus, it is never about having more tools, more brains, more skill, more success, it is always about having faith. Even mustard seed sized faith will do, it is all you need to be a disciple. From the humblest of beginnings, when we are faithful, we are able to accomplish amazing things. It is so easy to forget this simple truth when we are surrounded by a culture that thrives on success. Our culture in America teaches us that we must seek success in everything we do. We put pressure we put on our children in school to not be left behind. We market every consumable that will make us succeed in our personal and professional lives. The unreal television shows that pit contestants against each other, dangling a prize to encourage you to step on your opponents to achieve success. Everywhere we turn people are either winners or losers.

Jesus doesn’t see the world that way. People are either faithful or they are fertile soil waiting for the seed of faith to be planted. No one is a failure. Each of us has at least a mustard seed of faith rolling around in us, and that is enough. Often times, it is our own insecurity about our ability to be successful Christians that keeps us from entering fully into the Christian life. We think that we don’t have enough faith, we don’t know enough about scripture, we aren’t that good at praying, we lack discipline, we don’t have enough money to give much, and we don’t follow all the rules. We couldn’t possibly be real followers of Jesus or we would be successful at all that stuff. Because we don’t value the mustard seed of faith, we never allow ourselves the chance to exercise our faith and move a mulberry tree.

Or perhaps we focus so exclusively on *our ability* to get it right and be successful at knowing the bible, saying prayers, giving a lot of our resources and following all of the rules that the Holy Spirit can never penetrate deeply into our soul and the mustard seed of faith is still waiting to be planted. Our own determination to have *more* faith is the very stumbling block that keeps us from having any faith at all. Either way, it is the idol of success that keeps us from trusting the seed of faith within us.

Perhaps, rather than crying out “Increase our faith!” Instead of worrying that we aren’t doing it perfectly, we might cry out to Jesus, “Help us trust the faith we have!” Assist us in believing that a mustard seed is enough, we are enough, we have all we need to be your

disciples. It is not our own proficiency that will lead us closer to God, but rather our reliance on God's love for us that will help us draw our heart closer to God's. So let us be faithful and discover together what we can do when we trust in the mustard seed planted within us.

Amen.