

Connecting Mustard Seed Around the World [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 17:5—10

How do we measure our faith? *Do* we measure our faith? Ought we, should we, be in the business of estimating and keeping tabs on levels of faith? And if so, how? Do we calculate by the number of times we've read the Bible? Do we keep track of the frequency of our worship attendance? Do we factor in how often we've said the so-called Sinner's Prayer and accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior? Do I measure *my* faith by comparing and contrasting it with others—on the basis of how many good things have happened to me, and how many bad things have happened to them? Do I measure faith? Do you? And if not, why not? In the satirical 2004 film, *Saved*, a group of teenage girls at an evangelical Christian school spend their days squabbling with one another; and the dialogue goes like this:

- “Mary, turn away from Satan. Jesus, loves you.”
- “You don't know the first thing about love.”
- “I am filled with Christ's love! You're just jealous of my success in the Lord!”

Now, that's quite a statement. But it brings to mind the conversation that Jesus is having with his disciples in today's gospel. And it also brings to mind the ways that you and I may talk and listen to one another during this interim process. Jesus, in Luke 17, responds to an imperative that comes to him from “*The apostles*,” which is interesting in that only five verses earlier had these same followers of Jesus been referred to as “*the disciples...*” And the imperative sounds like this: “*Increase our faith!*”

So what do you say? If you and I adopt the persona of “the apostles” it’s clear that we want to improve, to get better, to somehow augment our skills or our knowledge—or maybe our status. And, respectively, we might imagine how our Rabbi, Teacher, Master and Lord Jesus would only be too happy to hear us asking for such an increase. But, you see, if the ordinary procedure for arriving at this *Increase in Faith* is do *X*, and then do *Y* and then complete the process with *Z*, Jesus has something else in mind:

“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.”

Ah, excuse me, Jesus. We’re not really interested, at this time, in the best way to landscape our beachfront property. And we’re not too keen on mustard seeds or mulberry trees. So what in the world does any of this have to do with increasing our faith?

I’ll never forget that scene in the film, *Dead Poet’s Society*, when Mr. Keating tells his students to read the introduction to their poetry books—and then to rip it out. Of course, all of the private-school pupils are hesitant at first. Initially, they had come to this class as if it were like Advanced Mathematics—as if they would learn their algebraic formulas, arrive at the right answers and receive their good grades. But Mr. Keating tells them, “We’re not laying pipe here” and that the reason we read and write poetry is because “we’re members of the human race,” and the human race is filled with passion, and with a yearning for love. And, you see, in a similar way Jesus stirs the disciples’ imagination by immersing them in the symbols of the *mustard seed*, the *mulberry tree* and the *sea*. And he’s inviting them to stay with the symbols, to steep in them, to marinate in them ... without lunging for the easy answer: ‘Oh, this means that and that means this; and now that I’ve plugged in what these symbols symbolize, I can forget about them. On the contrary, Jesus might be going in a different direction altogether.

I don't know about you, but I take it for granted that the red light at the intersection means STOP—that it commands an action for my own good and for the welfare of others. Moreover, when I set foot in *McDonald's* I take it for granted that Golden Arches equals fast food. And yet, throughout the Bible, what we experience is a montage of symbols that simultaneously command us and invite us to come and eat—but not so fast! In fact, if we're honest, more often than not, it's the symbols and the images, employed by Jesus, which confuse us more than we'd like to admit. People are always telling me how they don't need church; all they need is Jesus and their own private belief in Jesus; but I believe that's wrong because what is church if not that community of faith where we stew in the actual words of Jesus; and we do that through face-to-face interaction, and through dialogue, and ultimately through collective praise. For example, perhaps, when we come to this table this morning, we ought not be so sure that these symbols of Bread and Wine are 'just symbols'. In other words, when Jesus says, ***"Take, eat! This is my body"*** and when he says, ***"This cup is the new covenant in my blood"***—it's not supposed to be like ordering a 'Happy Meal' at *McDonald's*. Is it? Anyway, there are no sesame seeds involved in this meal... but maybe a few, or more than a few, mustard seeds.

The mustard seed, in first century Judea, was the smallest of all seeds. (There are smaller seeds in the world, but these are the seeds that Jesus wants his apostles—his 'sent ones'—to really gnaw on. And yes, it's true: we're inclined to think that Jesus is ridiculing the disciples—that he's calling their faith puny and weak. But another way to interpret the symbol of the mustard seed is to consider its POTENTIAL. The mustard seed has potential; it's going to grow. And that's encouraging!

Fred Craddock, the famous preacher and commentator on this passage clued me into a possible interpretation. It's as if Jesus were saying, ***"If you had faith the size of a mustard seed—AND YOU DO—you could already do something with it."*** And so, where might we go from here? If Jesus is using this symbol to encourage, what's he encouraging us to do? And the answer, you see, involves more symbolism. He says, well... ***"you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*** And that's really strange, isn't it? In fact, in Matthew's Gospel (17:20), Jesus refers to the symbol of the *mountain*; that is, if we had faith the size of a mustard seed, you and I could move Mount Spokane, or Mount Rainier, or more than likely he means Mount Sinai. Nonetheless, in Luke, there's no mountain that's in the way, but rather this mulberry tree, which hasn't done anything to anyone. There it is—so cultivated, so lush, so deeply ensconced in the neighborhood. It's a landmark. Where would you like to go? You want to go to church? It's right there next to the mulberry tree. And yet, Jesus says, if apostles like us had any faith at all, we could transplant it. We could take this settled landmark and set it down in the chaos of the sea. We COULD do that. But now the question is — WHY. Why would we take this established, firmly rooted, symbol of our stability and put down its roots where it seems out of place, where it might even die...?

You see, I'm absolutely convinced that Jesus is up to something here. He's encouraging to anyone who has faith—even a seemingly small and insignificant seed of faith. But in the same breath, he's telling his apostles—his 'sent ones'—to de-stabilize and to de-construct the familiar landmarks of the neighborhood. And I should add, the symbolism of the sea is so chaotic that Revelation 21 says that in God's new heaven and new earth, ***"the sea was no more."***

And yet, in the meantime, before that Great and Terrific Day of Christ, we go there. People of faith—even the faith of a mustard size—go to the chaos and the instability of a world with mulberry trees. We take what’s settled—a settled belief, a settled feeling, a settled friendship, a settled way of doing church—and we plant it in the unruly, undercurrents and riptides of the world.

My sister, Linda, and I had a Zoom call last week about my 95-year-old mother, who reads the Bible day and night, and who for the past 30 years of her life as a widow, hasn’t gone to a church. Anyway, my sister was telling me about how she had invited a neighbor-lady to have tea and scones with them, and that this neighbor-lady had just lost her husband two months ago and would have celebrated her birthday alone... So Linda asked her to come over and sit at the table with my Mom; and I don’t know if it was dementia or something else, but my Christian mother got very angry and said that she didn’t want any visitors; she didn’t want this person, this stranger, to sit at the table and eat food with them. And here’s how things played out: very politely but very deliberately, Linda told my mother that her neighbor would be coming over and that she was not going to un-invite her. And when this stranger met my mother, it turns out they grew up one block from one another in the same neighborhood, where there were maple trees and oak trees and maybe a few mulberry trees; and they talked and they listened and they laughed at one another’s stories. And it turns out, if you had faith the size of a scone—*and you do*—you could say this this bizarre anxiety, be uprooted and planted in the sea.

Just for a split second, just for a flicker of a second, it occurred to me that this morning's reading from the Book of Lamentations *is* faith. I know what it sounds like; it sounds like despair; it sounds like the most desperate kind of sadness and dark doubt. But I wonder if it's not the smallest seed to name the feeling: ***"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow..."*** Jesus, I would argue, loves that symbol of that widow. In other words, he exposes himself to all the grief the world can throw at him; and in today's gospel, he encourages those with faith to face up to discouragement. Think about that paradox. Faith germinates in territories where not having faith makes the most sense. Faith puts down roots in spheres of influence when not having faith makes the most sense.

And here we are today at Northwood Presbyterian Church. And here we are at the symbolic table of the Lord's Supper. Where's our faith? Ironically, if we put our feet up on the table and clasp our hands behind our heads, that's not faith. If we believe we deserve a respite, a reward, a thank-you, an honorable mention... for the thousands of times we've come forward to receive the Sacrament, that's not faith. Faith is the frailest thing. It sits in the dirt of our lives for a long, long time, and then when conditions are right, it does things and keeps doing them. And the reason I can make those statements is the symbolism that Jesus drops into the mix in verses seven through ten:

"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!'"

Sheryl and I once took a trip to Germany; and we felt as if we deserved it. We had been very busy, not only helping to increase the faith of a new church development, but also with raising our two young children. And so we flew *Lufthansa* into Frankfurt and then drove on the *Autobahn* with Sheryl's sister (who lives there); and occasionally, the familiar symbols of the *McDonalds* golden arches would provide me with a strange sense comfort; and we'd stop to rest; and I'd say to the man behind the counter, "Eine coke, bitte." Then, of course, we arrived at the castle where Martin Luther had translated the Greek New Testament into the colloquial language of German peasants—and I loved the symbolism of that history as well. After that, however, we checked into a hotel where the concierge told us about this expansive underground sauna; and we couldn't wait!

We entered the sauna at first timidly; but seeing no one else around, we decided to do what Europeans sometimes do, which is to strip naked and bask in the steam. And that's what we were doing, quite innocently, when I noticed a sign to my left. It was in German, of course, and it read, *der Notruf*. At this point the steam was dissipating and we were getting cold; and so, feeling confident about the symbolism, I assumed the sign meant 'MORE STEAM' and yanked on the rope which hung from it. A minute later, it became clear that I had misunderstood the symbol. A bunch of hotel employees, carrying medical gear, charged into the sauna; and with nervous smiles on their faces, they asked, why we had pulled the Emergency Cord.

So where's the emergency? Is faith in Christ Jesus like pulling the symbol for MORE STEAM, or is it the EMERGENCY we didn't see coming?