

Pentecost 20C (10/2/2016)

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Psalm 37:1-9

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

Even as we are preoccupied with the size of our faith, Jesus entrusts us with the work of faith. When we shift our focus away from ourselves to the One in whom we put our trust – when our self-consciousness becomes Christ-consciousness – we discover that our tiny faith is sufficient to tread in the Way he sets out for us.

When she heard that a little faith could uproot a mulberry tree and replant it in the sea, a woman with an overgrown garden decided to give it a try. “It can’t hurt,” she thought as she prepared for bed, and she prayed earnestly for the removal of her unwanted foliage. Awakening in the morning with a twinge of anticipation, she hurried to her back door where she found her garden exactly as it had been the night before. “Just as I thought,” she sighed.

We can all relate. Jesus declares that faith the size of a mustard seed can reshape the scenery.¹ But I don’t see much supernatural landscape architecture going on, do you? Apparently, none of us possesses even seed-size faith. This is a discouraging insight in light of the disciples’ plea for more faith. It’s a reasonable request; can’t Jesus at least acknowledge that their hearts are in the right place this time? After all, he has called them into a way of life that runs counter to their conditioning. Love your enemies, do not judge, expand your definition of family, associate with the poor and the outcast, forgive again and again and again, take up your cross. “Increase our faith!” the disciples beseech him. The challenge of

¹ See John M. Buchanan, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 141.

following Jesus requires commensurate faith, doesn't it? Who among us does not want faith to match the size of the task at hand?

"If you had faith the size of a mustard seed...." But we don't. We do, however, have a solemn responsibility to our calling as disciples: "Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?" Jesus continues, "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are [mere] slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.'" **The request for more faith does not move Jesus to compassion. Instead, he calls us back into dutiful service.**

At first, Jesus' words might sound like a rebuke, a harsh reply to well-meaning followers who are in the midst of a sincere struggle. Doesn't he understand how hard this is? Doesn't he know how ill equipped they feel? Why can't he just grant their request, like he grants requests for healing? Why can't he just give them a little boost to their self-confidence?

But maybe there is something more to Jesus' response. Maybe, as always, there is life-giving wisdom in his words. Like the first disciples, we desire more faith, much like we desire more of any seemingly scarce resource.² But **faith is not a possession;³ it's not something we can acquire or preserve or accumulate. Rather, faith is a posture, a bearing, an outlook; it's a way of life.** So, rather than grow our supply of faith, Jesus dispels our anxiety over having too little in the first place. *Yes, your faith is smaller than a mustard seed, he implies, but I have called you to a life of discipleship anyway.* Even as we are preoccupied with the *size* of our faith, in other words, Jesus entrusts us with the *work* of faith.

² See David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/09/pentecost-20-c-every-day-acts-of-faith/>.

³ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 613.

The good news, then, is that **Jesus has judged our tiny faith to be sufficient.**

You are enough.⁴ God has named you Beloved Child and given you distinct gifts to bring to bear on the world around you. Christ has chosen you – yes, *you* – to be his disciple. And, like Timothy’s grandmother Lois and mother Eunice, your ancestors in faith have marked out a path for you. So, in spite of your hesitation, each new moment represents an opportunity to exercise your faith, to live it out. *You already have all the faith you need, Jesus insists, now roll up your sleeves and get to it.*

That’s not to say the work of discipleship is easy, or that our insecurity is unfounded. On the contrary, the reign of God runs up against opposition at every turn, and the world tells us that discipleship is foolish. It’s normal to feel self-conscious. But **when we shift our focus away from ourselves to the One in whom we put our trust – when our self-consciousness becomes Christ-consciousness – we discover that our tiny faith is enough to tread in the Way he sets out for us.** Think of Peter stepping out of the boat onto the sea. As long as his eyes are fixed on Jesus, his steps are sure. But as soon as he turns his attention to the wind, self-doubt takes over and he sinks.⁵

Of course, the everyday work of faith is not as dramatic as walking on water or uprooting trees. More likely, the Way of discipleship looks like taking time with a grieving friend in the midst of a frenzied schedule, stopping to help a stranger in need, letting go of our bitterness toward someone whose culture or politics we don’t like, going out of our way to express gratitude or appreciation, or speaking up on behalf of the vulnerable.

⁴ See 2 Corinthians 3:4-5.

⁵ Matthew 14:28-31.

The crosses we carry are sacrifices for the sake of love. Large or small, these are sacrifices Jesus simply expects of us: “...when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are [mere] slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.’” But he does not expect anything of us that God has not asked of him. **We are servants of the gospel, and he is our exemplar:** “...the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ...I am among you as one who serves.”⁶

Our steps are stumbling, dear church, but rest assured, we are enough. Christ has called us to follow him on the Way, and it’s not because the size of our faith has made us eligible. No reserve of our own is sufficient to follow him to the cross, but only the grace he gives us for each leg of the journey. So, let go of your self-doubt, keep your eyes on Christ, and take the next step.

⁶ Luke 22:26-27.