

20th Sunday after Pentecost – October 2, 2016
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera
Readings: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4, Psalm 37:1-10, 2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10

The disciples asked him for more faith, and Jesus said, “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 would be hypocritical and perhaps even unrighteous for me stand here and say that our faith makes everything perfect all the time in our lives because we live in the real world and we know that life situations cause our faith to ebb and flow. One need only take into consideration how the disciples faith ebbed and flowed – and they knew Jesus first hand. In today’s Gospel story they asked Jesus to increase their faith despite having witnessed him performing miracle upon miracle! Yes, faith might be the size of a mustard seed because regardless of whether we believe in God, in a higher power, in the universe or not, faith is part of our DNA. Additionally, having it doesn’t prevent the faithful from suffering, lamenting, or having to make sacrifices.

Jesus believed that with the tiniest seed of faith (what I refer to as the faith DNA), believers accomplish so much. That was why he used the story of the mulberry tree as a response to his disciples’ request to increase their faith. What he was trying to help them understand was that we have all the faith we need, and that yes there are times when we feel worthless or inadequate or without faith, so we have to figure out ways to exercise our faith muscles during the peaks and valleys so that we can uproot the barriers trying to separate us from the love and spirit of God, and send those barriers for a deep-sea swim.

I was blessed this week with at least three opportunities to witness faith not only in words but also in action. It took my being in those places, in the situations I’ll describe in a moment for my faith to be reenergized, my mustard seed to be watered. One of those incidences was with a group of clergy and Bishop Susan. I’m part of a diocesan think tank for congregational development and we met this week in Spotsylvania. The meeting began the way most vestry meetings to, with prayer and a biblical reflection. The faith in action piece happened for me as I listened to the bishop and my colleagues wrestle with today’s Gospel text. Some asked whether the disciples were being a bit entitled by asking Jesus to increase their faith. Or were the disciples approaching Jesus with reverence and humility acknowledging that despite being eyewitnesses, they needed assurances about their faith and assurances of his support. It was humbling to hear twenty-five people’s different perspectives on a brief piece of scripture. I came away with these words, ‘it’s on you’. Putting my faith in action is on me, it’s on each one of us. One’s faith isn’t on God because God gave the seed and through the power of the Holy Spirit we are in sync, less sync, or not in sync at all with our faith. God maintains an open-door policy for all of humanity, constantly calling us to increase our faith by being fully present in the smallest situation that life puts before us.

And so, entitlement was one of the points that was brought up in the biblical reflection with my colleagues. Were the disciples feeling entitled and wanted Jesus to get to work? After

all, didn't God send the only begotten Son so that he could help them and the world? It was asked by the group whether we respond that way with our elected officials believing that we pay taxes so they must do the work on our behalf and we are here to receive. It was asked whether we respond that way towards the teachers that teach our children forgetting sometimes that our children must take responsibility for learning too. It was asked whether people respond that way toward their clergy given that they are paid to build the church and develop the faith of the faithful. The reality is that it is up to us, because the village isn't built by one person acting alone. Jesus told his disciples that they had enough faith seeds, they just had to believe it and put their own faith to work.

The second opportunity I had to witness faith in action this week happened with the group of people who participated in the *followHim* adult small group gathering. It was inspiring to hear people talk about fear, grace, community, and the support that many have received by this faith community. Listening to others in that group helped increase my faith and it wasn't a Pollyanna theological reflection either, the testimonies of those present and their life experiences affirmed my faith in the community, my faith in St. Gabriel's, my faith in the power of the Holy Spirit – I guess that's why it is called *followHim*. I had the opportunity to see and hear the image of Christ in the stories of those present. If you get a chance to attend, do so, you won't regret it.

The third opportunity to witness faith in action took place yesterday at Paxton Campus during St. Gabriel's first celebration of Hispanic Heritage. I was humbled once again by the work of the people of God among us, as I witnessed our newest parishioners help transform the community. Over sixty people attended despite the weather, and our San Gabrielinos or St. Gabrielites, together with the DREAMers MOMS and other community service providers mobilized folks to attend and celebrate our hispanicity. There was much food, music, great piñataing (new verb), wonderful fellowship, children, teens, men and women of all ages; even a pro-bono immigration attorney who offered free legal counseling to folks – she was still there behind closed doors at the ALLY Center way past the end of the party given the scarcity of affordable immigration lawyers in western Loudoun County. It takes a village to be a village, and events like this one reminded me to have more faith in the power of the Spirit among us. The village is capable of uprooting mulberry trees and sending them for a swim in the sea!

Our littleness in the vast ocean might make us feel unworthy, unknowledgeable, spiritually small; but the mustard seed is also small, and it becomes a grown plant! I invite you to remember that the disciples were looking God right in the face, they experienced God's truest revelation firsthand, yet they still felt that they needed more faith. They asked for more as though faith was a static commodity, but as we know, faith is a dynamic relationship that unfolds through one's life journey. Faith can accomplish wonders, I don't have to tell you that, it's alive in you, it grows in you; and don't forget, you have it all within you! Amen!