

October 2, 2016
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:1-10

Just a Teensy Bit of Faith

“There’s so much! I can’t do this. It’s too hard. I don’t even know where to start. And I don’t even want to try!” Sometimes you might hear that at our house. Mostly on Monday mornings. Mostly from me as I look at the gigantic pile of laundry that needs to be done. And I think of all the other things on that big, big list of things to do in the next week. On Monday in particular, that list looks impossible to me. And I wonder how in the world I will get it done, and how in the world I will manage to be a good wife and a good mom and do a good job at work all at the same time. There are days when I am sure that I can’t. And then I feel even worse because I’m supposed to be able to. I’m supposed to believe without a doubt that God can get me through anything. Jesus says that if I have even the teensy bit of faith, I’ll be able to move mountains and plant mulberry trees in the ocean.

Sometimes I feel like I don’t have that kind of any faith. And maybe you feel that way too sometimes. That you don’t have what it takes. And that you don’t measure up as a Christian. That when Jesus was handing out

faith, he must have skipped you, because you couldn't move mountains or mulberry bushes if you tried. If you have ever felt that way, that your faith was not big enough, then you are not alone. Because today, the disciples feel that way too. They feel inadequate and unqualified to be Jesus' disciples, especially when he spells out what they have to do.

"Holy moly, Jesus," they said. "It's too much to ask. We can't do all that. We're going need more faith!" But Jesus tells them and he tells us that just a little bit of faith is enough. The teeniest, tiniest mustard seed-sized amount is enough for God. Because you don't need much and like a seed it will grow.

In our scripture reading today, the disciples feel like they don't have enough faith. They are discouraged by Jesus' difficult instructions for discipleship. And how he wants them to be on their guard and to mind what they are doing. See, we tend to focus on what others are doing and how THEY are missing the mark. But Jesus says it's our behavior we need to work on. It's our behavior and the example we are setting that we need to watch. Do our actions make people want to know God or run away from God? "Don't be a stumbling block, Jesus says. Don't lead

others astray. Love one another. When you have a problem, talk to one another. Forgive one another. And then forgive again and then forgive again and then forgive again. Seven times a day if you have to.”

That’s a lot of forgiveness. It’s a lot of grace. It’s enough to wear you out just thinking about it. Just thinking about forgiving them that much every day; all those people in the church who are annoying and frustrating and disagreeable. Setting aside anger and resentment and that running argument with them you’ve got going on in your head. It’s the hardest thing Jesus asks us to do; to put up with one another and to have mercy on one other again and again and again. We know how nearly impossible it is and we might be thinking we might just want Jesus to hand us that millstone he talked about and tie it around us and throw us in the sea right now. I KNOW I won’t be able to do it. I WILL avoid conflict. And I will carry a grudge. And I will be impatient and stubborn and less than my best. And I want to be better and have gracious hospitality and endless supplies of mercy and the capacity to say yes to everything and everyone. I ought to have that kind of faith. But I don’t.

This week, I saw the movie, Bridge of Spies. It's about an insurance lawyer, James Donovan. In 1957, he was asked to defend a Soviet spy in court. And he did it faithfully even though it jeopardized his career and put his family at risk. Then the CIA asked him to negotiate a prisoner exchange, the Soviet spy for a US pilot. And he had to do it without official support of the US government. And this was at the height of the Cold War and Americans and Soviets were mortal enemies. Donovan worked for months and months. And he successfully got the pilot from the Russians, plus an American student from the East Germans. The movie has lots of great speeches and great moments when this average guy has way-above-average courage. He never thinks about what the cost might be to himself or his family. He just does what needs to be done because it needs to be done and it is the right thing to do. And during the movie, all I could think was, wow, I would never do that. And I wouldn't do that. AND I SURE wouldn't do that. I know I tend to look at others doing extraordinary things with extraordinary faith and think that's the ONLY kind of faith there is. Faith is only for Pope Francis or

Mother Teresa or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And I'm not like that. I'm not like them. I don't measure up.

Maybe you have told yourself that, that you don't measure up. That you don't have enough faith. Especially when you see the life of forgiveness Jesus wants you to lead. And you know how hard is and have you seen the world lately, Lord? It's full of violence. Lord, increase our faith.

There are too many drugs, too many guns. Lord, increase our faith.

There are too many people with broken homes and broken spirits. Lord, increase our faith. And our hearts, they are broken too with our own grief and loss and disappointment. Lord, increase our faith.

But Jesus says we just need a tiny bit of faith, faith the size of a mustard seed. Now some Bible commentators disagree about what Jesus says.

Some say he is criticizing the disciples for not having any faith. "(sigh)

If only you blocked-headed disciples would have the teensiest bit of faith, you could do this." But others say that Jesus is actually

encouraging his disciples. That if they look, they will see that little bit of faith is already in them right now. And it could be that Jesus is saying

both things. He could be both frustrated because the disciples still don't

get it. And he could be telling them they already have all the faith they need. What he IS telling them is that faith isn't really about them and what they can do. It's about what God can do. It isn't about them being more. It's about God being more. It's not about them managing everything, it's about God managing everything, and trusting and obeying step by step, every day.

It only takes a teensy tiny bit of faith from us, faith the size of a mustard seed, Jesus says. First, that means we don't need much. Like the disciples, we think we need a lot. We think we have to do and fix and save and rescue and create God's kingdom on earth all by ourselves. But faith is just doing the work God has set before us. Just those things within reach. Just loving and forgiving and being merciful to those around us. It's doing our little servant job no matter how hard or disagreeable or pointless it is. Just obey, Jesus says. Like me. Just serve the least and the last. Just invite in the blind and the lame. Just seek the lost and the wayward. Just do the work God has in front of you; whether it's big or small. Maybe it's the next kind act for a family member. The next little act of courage at work. The next bit of mercy for the

vulnerable. That visit to the lonely. That shared meal with someone new. That smile for the misunderstood. That attempt to repair a relationship over and over and over again. Faith isn't about doing something big or with guaranteed results. It's about doing something obediently. All the time. Every day. Because Jesus asks us to. Showing up to love and forgive again and again. With that little bit of faith you have that God just might be at work and that God will make things right.

We just need a teensy bit of faith. Faith the size of a mustard seed. We don't have to pull off anything spectacular to have spectacular faith. We don't have to go on spectacular mission trips or do spectacular programs. Those things do good, but if spectacular is all we are looking for, it can actually keep us from the unspectacular work of real discipleship. The way of Jesus is humble and lowly and downwardly mobile and small. The way of Jesus puts others first no matter how insignificant the other person is or how little we get out of it. Biblical scholar, Greg Carey writes about how faith like that affected him. He was raised in the Bible Belt, but he did not grow up in church. He says: "When I was twelve, I spent a week in the hospital with a hip injury. I

received two visits, one from my aunt and uncle's part-time pastor and one from a church youth group. The youth group brought a cutely packaged soap and washcloth. Just a few years later, when I could embrace my faith, I remembered both of those visits. That's the kind of thing Christians do.”¹ Small, servant acts of faith are what the Kingdom of God is all about.

We just need a little bit of faith, first. And second, he teaches us that faith is small, like a seed, because it will grow. Right now, outside in nature, the world is covered in seeds. They are everywhere in our flower beds, on the streets, bouncing off our cars. Acorns, chestnuts, pinecones, walnuts, those great helicopter seeds from the maple trees. At our house, we collect them. And the squirrels are out collecting too. And later in the spring, we will find out where some of those other little seeds ended up. We will discover a tomato plant here. An oak tree growing there. A catalpa in the driveway. I think Jesus wanted us to think about faith as a seed for a reason. Because seeds grow. Our small acts of faith, they will

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=680

grow. And maybe they need to be small so can sneak in to all kinds of places. Maybe they need to be tiny and prolific so they can spread.

Those little seeds of grace and mercy that we plant can grow all around us and produce a great harvest.

We went to the Community Dinner at the Christian Church last Monday. And it was great. The food was great because Chef Ouita Michel cooks it and Ouita is, of course, a great chef. But Ouita does not make a big deal about doing this. She does not boast about fixing a free meal for her community. She doesn't brag about taking time out of her busy schedule to serve others. She just does it. To be faithful and humble. And that seed of faithfulness has grown and grown and connected people in our community in so many ways. In a world of division and hatred, Ouita and people at Midway Christian Church do something small but mighty; they bring people of all sorts in our community together faithfully.

We just need a little bit of faith. Because like a seed, it will grow. Like our Community Garden and our backpack program. Our small acts of love and forgiveness produce a harvest for God. Those little things that are in front of us to do every day. We just do them. We just show up.

We are just hopeful that God will be God and that God will grow our offerings into something good. Let us have a little bit of faith. And come to this table for a little bit of bread, and a little juice. God is here faithfully to serve us. To love us and forgive us. Come with what little you have to receive everything that is the Lord's.

2 Timothy 1:1-14

1Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

2To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

3I am grateful to God-whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did-when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. 4Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. 5I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. 6For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; 7for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

8Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, 9who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, 10but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, 12and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. 13Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Gospel Luke 17:1-10

Jesus said to his disciples, 'Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! 2It 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. 3Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. 4And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent", you must forgive.'

5The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6The 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.

7"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'? 8Would 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'? 9Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10So 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!'"