“Context is everything”. “So, what’s the context?” the sharp-eyed among us might ask, noting that our reading from Luke’s Gospel began with verse 5 of Chapter 17. Given that Luke didn’t write with chapter and verse—they were added much later—context may not mean much. BUT, in this case, there was a reason for the apostles’ request for Jesus “to increase their faith”. That context was Jesus’ charge to forgive repentant offenders, as much as seven times a day! “Lord, you’ve to be kidding! Forgive a repeat offender seven times every day! We can’t do that! You’ll need to increase our faith!” they reply. In other words, the “story”, they believed and had accepted for almost forever, was that forgiveness was a finite commodity. Forgiving that much could easily deplete the treasury! Jesus’ admonition was all about changing that narrative. To quote him from another interaction with his disciples, “With mortals, it’s impossible, but with God, all things are possible” (Mk 10.27 / Mt 19.26). In other words, “There is more within you than you believe. Let’s increase that!”

The apostles’ request to Jesus, however, was, and is, more universal than simply acquiring the grace to forgive extravagantly. Their excitement about Jesus, reflected in their questions and interactions, was due to his repeated challenges to the narratives with which they’d been raised. Sometimes his tactic was direct; think, for example, of how many times (in Matthew’s Gospel), he is quoted as saying “You have heard it said . . . But I say to you!” That’s a change of narrative! Other times it’s less direct, as in today’s reading. One thing, however, is clear from Jesus’ teachings: he wanted people to look afresh at the stories—the narratives—that were holding them, and others, back from experiencing “abundant life” (in John’s words), or life in the Kingdom of God (to use Luke’s language).

“Let’s change the narrative!” is a phrase many of you have probably heard me say, perhaps more than once. You probably, too, have heard me champion Appreciative Inquiry—that model for managing change that seeks to identify the best in any group/organization and build upon it. Those dual emphases of mine, I believe, are represented, too, in the encounters that Jesus had with his followers. He sought to change the predominant narratives in the society in which he lived.
His question to the apostles, that “if they had faith as of a mustard seed” was, in this way of thinking, an invitation to look back into their internal storehouse of tradition and experience to recover that “best of that past”, that it might become the foundation for their future.

With that as a background, then, what I’d like to do this morning is take a look back at what we’ve discovered in this, my first year as your pastor. I’m not saying that there are narratives that need to be changed . . . although probably there are. But what I do want to do is highlight what I’ve come to see and experience at Good Shepherd over these last 13 months (including our Congregational Vitality Survey, and our “Dot the Values” exercise). And, with those identifications of our “mustard seeds”, to look forward a bit; we are, after all, moving into a “Season of Visioning”. I believe that paying attention to the best we’ve experienced will translate into the best we have to offer our neighborhood and our world.

I believe this congregation genuinely cares about its members; our strengths are relationships! We didn’t need the Vitality Survey and our “Dots” exercise to tell us that. When a congregational need has arisen—whether it was working on rehabilitating the basement or supporting each other after some significant deaths in the church, you’ve risen to the challenge. Not content with the limited amount of time the pastor can devote to pastoral care, parishioners have imagined a Congregational Care Ministry, enabling many “sheep” to exercise their gifts in tending others’ needs. In a different context, I’m often having to herd y’all back into your pews at the “Peace”, because you’re so engaged in greeting one another! Connections made in Book Groups, Senior Singles or the Men’s Group are tight and supportive!

But into what might that “mustard seed” grown? The Congregational Care Ministry is on the verge of establishing a network of “shepherds” who will help ensure that folks know they’re being looked after. We’ve identified pressing needs surrounding mental health and suicide, and how they do have an impact on this congregation. Are we bold enough to think creatively how to extend our care to people facing those dark nights? Several—present and potential members—have asked me about how we might be more up-front in our support for LGBTQIA folks? How will our “mustard seeds” of “Caring Relationships” grow more and larger branches?

I believe, and we know that this congregation cares about its worship! “Caring Relationships” and “Spirit-filled Worship” were tied as our highest
“Vitality” strengths. We have amazing music, from handbells to contemporary music to Vivaldi and Buxtehude. We care so much about our worship and our music we were able in a year to raise money for, and install a new organ. Our lectors convey the meaning of Scripture in their effective reading. I’ve told our young acolytes that, when they raise the cross high during processions, my heart rises with it — and I imagine that’s true for some of you. “Lifting high the cross” is a mustard seed that can grow in our hearts and lives!

And, so, to what are we called in this regard? As I mentioned last week, we’re empowering our Lay Eucharistic Ministers to join me in distributing the bread at communion. We’ve learned so much from our youth preachers; what might we learn from other, lay, testimonials? Can we better utilize the resources the Episcopal Church provides, in terms of alternate prayers and forms of worship . . . even days and times of worship so that more might benefit?

I believe that our “spirit-filled worship” has been so much enhanced by the engagement of our young people on our Youth Sundays! The support that is shown by increasing attendance on those days is evidence that this congregation cares about its young people! As I mentioned, we are in awe of what we’ve heard from our preachers. We love seeing the growing procession of kids just prior to the Peace. Angel-haloes and sports uniforms delight us all.

Yes, I believe that our hope resides in our young people, in the “mustard seeds” they represent. But, to what do they call us? Yes, Youth Sundays are fabulous. but how might we include our youth more fully in the life, and decision-making, of the congregation than just three or four times a year. How might we support the parents and extended families of our children? Are there possibilities for some kinds of mentorship programs? How do we support our families who want their children to benefit, not only from church-related activities, but from the experiences that sports offer? Is it time to equip our Senior Singles (as some have suggested) to become surrogate grandparents, and give moms and dads (in the congregation and the neighborhood) a night out to renew their relationships?

I believe, I know, that this congregation cares about folks beyond its walls! There is a passion to serve the hungry and the homeless, whether at St. Clare’s, St. Francis or Covenant Cupboard. That passion extends beyond our national borders, with mission work in Jamaica and Jordan. We are working to translate our strength of “caring relationships” in such a way that when newcomers walk through our doors, they’re made to feel included from the get-go.
Our society is hungry, not just for food, but for hope! What do the “mustard seeds” of our passion for service offer? Might we move from simply serving the hungry and homeless—as important as that is—to asking about and addressing the issues that make that problem as significant as it is? Can we look deeply into our neighborhood’s needs—and there are plenty there—to understand the deep desires for connection and meaning that, despite our internet-connected society, plague so many young adults.

I believe, too, that this congregation raises up servant leaders. In the last year we’ve seen amazing work done by our parishioners. From those who’ve led the efforts to rebuild the basement and install the organ, to those who’ve taken on the task of managing the building and grounds, people rise up to lead. I am absolutely positive that there are others in the congregation who have experiences and passions un-tapped. We may know about them, but we haven’t encouraged them to see those gifts and talents as “mustard seeds”, ready to grow into visionary leaders for this flock. What are your “mustard seeds”?

You’re probably aware that we’re just about to begin our annual giving campaign—the theme this year being “Love in Service”. And, in a few moments, we will commission our “Stewardship Team”—faithful folks committed to the future of this congregation, to the hope of what we might be. They stand ready to answer questions and pray with us as we envision our next year. But, it is the whole congregation—all of us—who are the real “stewardship team”; we have been entrusted with this place, this past, these children, this neighborhood . . . and these hopes, both directly spoken and only imagined. We, collectively, hold the “mustard seeds” that will grow into great bushes in which the birds of the air—those seeking hope—can find rest. In the weeks to come, you’ll be given—through the E-News and Facebook—opportunities to hear folks speak about why THEY are at Good Shepherd and what THEY value about this community. They are compelling voices, pointing to our mustard seeds, as well as the “tree” that we can become.

“Increase our faith” we may cry, as if we have none, given the stories we’ve told ourselves for such a long time. I challenge us, on the contrary, to recognize OUR context NOW, and to cry, “We LOVE our mustard seeds! Empower us Jesus to bring all of our resources to bear to nurture them and watch them grow!”

Amen.