

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: We Are the Real Change

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, October 2, 2016

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Luke 17:5-10.

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

⁶He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.

⁷"Suppose one of you has a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? ⁸Won't he rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? ⁹Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? ¹⁰So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

This ends our reading from the Gospel of Luke. Thanks be to God.

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It's a little confusing, this scripture reading. It starts off with the apostles making an appeal to Jesus "increase our faith." That part makes perfect sense to me. I frequently go through my days begging for more faith, stronger faith, more certainty, more belief. I am completely susceptible to the trap that, if my faith were bigger, stronger, more powerful, then I would be able to accomplish more things.

It's rather like the story of the small congregation in the foothills of the Great Smokies. And by small, this is a congregation of 300 members, after all, we are in the Bible Belt.

My classmate from seminary was appointment to this church. They built a new sanctuary on a piece of land that had been willed to them by a church member. Ten days before the new church was to open, the local building inspector informed the pastor that the parking lot was inadequate for the size of the building. Until the church doubled the size of the parking lot, they would not be able to use the new sanctuary. Unfortunately, the church with its undersized lot had used every inch of their land except for the mountain against which it had been built.

In order to build more parking spaces, they would have to move the mountain out of the back yard. Undaunted, George, the pastor announced the next Sunday morning that he would meet that evening with all members who had "mountain moving faith." They would hold a prayer session asking God to remove the mountain from the back yard and to somehow provide enough money to have it paved and painted before the scheduled opening dedication service the following week.

At the appointed time, 24 of the congregation's 300 members assembled for prayer. They prayed for nearly three hours. At ten o'clock George said the final "Amen". "We'll open next Sunday as scheduled," he assured everyone. "God has never let us down before, and I believe God will be faithful this time too."

The next morning as he was working in his study there came a loud knock at his door. When he called "come in", a rough looking construction foreman appeared, removing his hard hat as he entered.

"Excuse me, Reverend. I'm from Acme Construction Company over in the next county. We're building a huge shopping mall. We need some fill dirt. Would you be willing to sell us a chunk of that mountain behind the church? We'll pay you for the dirt we remove and pave all the exposed area free of charge but only if we can have it right away. We can't do anything else until we get the dirt in and allow it to settle properly."

That new sanctuary at that little church was dedicated the next Sunday as originally planned and there were far more members with "mountain moving faith" on opening Sunday than there had been the previous week!

I want that. And I leave open the possibility that it could happen but only under the category of "anything can happen." If George hadn't told the story to me himself, I wouldn't believe it.

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Because in real life? No, that just doesn't happen. In my humble opinion, that is just faith magic and I think that faith, having faith, being faithful, is the farthest thing from magic that I can imagine. Still I have that constant desire to have more faith – so I understand the plea of the disciples.

But then this scripture moves from the plea for more faith to Jesus saying that if we had even the faith of a tiny little mustard seed that we would be able to uproot a tree and plant it in the sea with no effort at all. Now that's just down right curious. It sounds like a sci-fi movie or some other James Cameron "Avatar" reality. Now the Jesus I know is not a sci-fi character so this turn of events seems off. It doesn't fit the rest of the picture. Something else must be going on here.

So I did what I think most of us when we see or hear something that doesn't seem right, we go looking for the context, we go looking for the surrounding story – what prompted that reply? Where are they that this was the answer? What had just happened to set up this conversation?

So you go back a few verses, a chapter or two in the Gospel of Luke and you see that Jesus has been calling disciples, teaching parables about the rich and the poor, the lost and the found, and living because of the hospitality of strangers. After all of this hard work and miles of journey, Jesus turns to the disciples, leaning in close and he says, "Things will get hard, but don't screw it up. If someone does you wrong, no matter what they do, seven times in a day, you have to turn back to them, you HAVE to forgive them." That's the story just before this one.

Do you get it? The disciples are exhausted. This kind of work is hard and demanding. And, when faced with a demanding job, we have to get ready. We need to prepare. We'll need more supplies; we'll need more maps, more education, more training. No way can I do all this.

I'm a novice at doing forgiveness. I'm a beginner when it comes to discipleship. I'm not ready, not by a long shot. Please, Lord, increase my faith.

I get it. I do. In order to move a mountain, I'll need a faith bigger than the mountain. To overcome a bigger obstacle, I'll need more strength and perseverance to climb it. The more serious the illness, then I'll need an even greater faith to overcome it. And the more damaging the injustice, God knows the more faith I would need in order to have it forgiven.

Forgiveness is some of the hardest work we have ever been called to do. To let go, to move on, to work at restoration, to begin again. Forgiving can feel like giving in, like giving up, like forfeiting principle or pride. Forgiving can mean admitting that I was wrong. And if I'm honest? I haven't done nearly enough of it.

If I'm understanding this correctly, my faith has to be in proportion to the problem at hand, to the size of the request. My faith has to be HUGE if I'm going to keep forgiving people for all the things they do that really piss me off. There is so much to do. There are so many problems. "Increase our faith, O Lord. Increase our faith."

But, I'm not understanding this correctly. Jesus says no matter that size of your faith, you are already enough. Your faith does not have to be huge and gigantic and rock-solid and impenetrable in

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order to address an obstacle or mountain or an injustice or illness. Your faith does not need to be great to address great need. How much faith do you have right now? Do you have a mountain of faith? An acre of faith? Do you have a gallon of faith or maybe even just a teaspoon of faith? Maybe your faith is one slice of Swiss cheese with all sorts of holes of doubt and questions.

Jesus says, that's okay, regardless of the size of your faith, God is using your faith to do something powerful, something good, something purposeful. It turns out that you are not the active ingredient. God is the active ingredient. The faith of a mustard seed is just as powerful as mountain of faith because God is doing the heavy lifting to transform our words and actions into love.

And if you have everything you need, then the only thing to do is to put on your work apron and get busy doing it. Our task is to quit complaining about how hard life is – I don't have enough time, I don't have enough money, I don't have the talent or the energy -- throwing all of our excuses in our way. Our job is to put on our work apron – as Jesus said – go get busy, get dirty, get engaged, rub elbows, use what you have, do the work.

- Care for those in need
- Protect the vulnerable
- Reach out to the lonely
- Befriend the friendless
- Share a meal
- Work for peace
- Forgive.

It's all the ordinary stuff we do all the time and, taken together and blessed by God, it becomes extraordinary. To use Jesus' example that the faith of a mustard seed can plant a tree in the sea, then perhaps we are simply not dreaming big enough. On this World Communion Sunday, our prayers should be for

- Clean water
- Sustainable environments
- An end to hunger
- Free health care
- Free education
- An end to war and violence

On this World Communion Sunday, our faith – however big or small – has brought us to a table of forgiveness, a table of acceptance, a table where differences are celebrated and connections are built. Even a faith full of holes is holy in God's sight.

By our work the Real Change of God's love can transform us all. As Mother Teresa said, "Our calling is not to do great things, but to do small things with great love." And that is something we can all do right here, right now. Amen.