

FAITH AS SMALL AS A MUSTARD SEED
Rev. Jason Santalucia

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Text: Luke 17:1-10

Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It 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. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And 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."

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The 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. 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'? Would 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'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So 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!'"

When I hear Jesus mention a mulberry tree, I think of Hudson Falls. That's the town where my wife and I lived when our kids were little and I was serving my first church. The reason I think of Hudson Falls is because it had a lot of mulberry trees. They grew in the alley behind our house. They grew along the canal where we used to go for walks. They grew in the playground of my daughter's elementary school. And in the summer we used to take buckets and go around and fill them up with mulberries and make mulberry pies—lots and lots of mulberry pies because mulberry trees get pretty big, and they produce a lot of mulberries. The ones at Jinju's school were nearly the size of maple trees, and we'd get two or three buckets from each one.

Now, I don't know if Jesus is talking about the exact same variety of mulberry tree that we had in Hudson Falls. Probably not. But I get the feeling from the reading today that the one he's looking at is similarly large because of the point he's making. He just finished giving a group of Pharisees a rather difficult teaching on money and how we shouldn't value it more than people. And then he turns to the disciples and gives them an equally difficult teaching on forgiveness. Basically he tells them:

Look, there are going to be times when my you, my followers, don't live up to the hopes and dreams I have for you. There are going to be times when you don't get along, when you disagree, when you say things and do things that cause each other hurt and pain. That's to be expected. You're only human, after all. But what's important is how you respond when you're the ones on the receiving end—when one of your sisters or brothers causes you some kind of insult or injury.

When that happens—and believe me, it'll happen—you need to forgive them. And if they mess up again, and they come to you later and ask for a second chance, you need to forgive them. And if they keep messing up over and over, as many times as they say they're sorry and promise to do better, you need to forgive them.

Obviously I'm paraphrasing. Jesus wasn't nearly as long-winded as that. But I'm trying to get across what he's saying here because in some ways the world hasn't changed all that much since he was around, and he could easily be speaking to many churches today, where people don't get along. The fact is, twenty-first century disciples don't live up to Jesus' hopes and dreams any better than first-century disciples. We still say things and do things that cause each other hurt and pain. Because even after two-thousand years, we're still only human. But what's important is how we respond when we're the ones on the receiving end. Jesus doesn't expect us to always be perfect and never say an unkind word, but he does expect us to always be gracious and never turn our backs.

That's a difficult teaching, indeed, and in the reading the disciples really struggle with it. They don't think they have the capacity to be endlessly forgiving. They don't think their hearts are big enough. So they ask Jesus to increase their faith, as if faith is some kind of consumable resource, like heating oil or gasoline. *Fill us up*, they say. *We need some spiritual fuel. Our tanks are on empty.*

But that's not how it works. Faith isn't something we consume. It's not something we run out of and have to go looking for more. Just the opposite, faith is something that grows and expands all on its own. So even if the disciples have only a smidgen of faith, they can do incredible things. Jesus tells them if they had faith the size of a mustard seed—a tiny little speck you can hardly see—they could say to one of those maple-size mulberry trees in my daughter's old schoolyard, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would obey. The point being, the disciples have all the faith they need. They don't have to wait around until they reach a certain level before they can start living the life Jesus is telling them to live. Wherever they are on their spiritual path, and whatever amount of faith they have, it's enough. It's enough to be understanding and compassionate; it's enough to realize they've all said and done things they wish we could take back; it's enough to show each other a little mercy.

Which is good news for us. It means we don't have to wait around either. Whether we have much faith, or whether we would like to have more, right here, right now, it's within our reach be the community Jesus envisioned—a community where there's no limit on second chances; a community where no one who honestly wants to make amends is ever written-off or turned away; a community where we experience reconciliation—something that's more and more rare in the world these days. And we may struggle with that the same way the disciples in the reading struggle with it. We may not think our hearts are big enough. But there's one place where we are reminded on a regular basis that even if we don't believe in ourselves, God does; even if we don't think we're enough just the way we are, God does; even if we don't think faith the size of a mustard seed is worth anything, God does.

That place is right here at this table.

At the church I served in Hudson Falls, we served communion in the pews. And there was this one woman who never participated. When the trays of bread and juice got to her, she'd down the row without taking any. So one Sunday I asked her about it, and she said the reason she didn't take communion was because she didn't feel worthy. She had the same idea a lot of people have—that we have to achieve some state of spiritual purity before we can come to the table, which is kind of like saying you have to finish the race before you can begin. So I told her whatever it was that was holding her back, whatever burden she was carrying, she didn't have to worry about it. She could let it go. We don't share in this meal because we're perfect, and we've earned it. We share in this meal, I told her, because Jesus is the host, and he invites us, even though we're not perfect, and we haven't earned it.

I don't know if she was able to hear that or not. I hope all of you can because communion isn't something that only happens once a month. It's something that shapes us as a church everyday. It's something that nurtures our faith and builds our capacity to be the people Jesus calls us to be. Because when we give each other unmerited grace, we're simply giving each other what we've already received ourselves—what God has extended to each of us at this table, in this meal: freedom from the past, a fresh start, and the peace that comes from knowing we are accepted. Amen.