

October 2, 2016, 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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**Focus:** God uses what is worthless to do amazing things.

This week's Gospel can seem a bit harsh. In the verses, immediately before ours, Jesus has asked the disciples to do something really hard. He says if someone sins against you seven times in one day, but then tells you they repent seven times in a day, you must forgive them each and every time. A lot of times it's hard to forgive a person once, but seven times a day? That just seems impossible. But the apostles, to their credit, don't complain about how hard it is. Instead, they ask Jesus, "Lord, increase our faith." And we might expect the Lord who told us, "Ask, seek, knock" to grant their request. But that's not what happens.

"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.'"

Request denied—And not very helpfully either, right? The apostles already know they don't have enough faith. Why is Jesus chiding them for not even having faith the size of a mustard seed?

And make no mistake. For us to believe what Jesus is describing, we stand with the disciples, "Lord, increase our faith." Now in the past year since I've been here, I've spent several sermons talking about mustard seeds. This week, I want to focus on the mulberry tree that Jesus mentions. Growing up in Midland, my family had a mulberry tree. It was huge. It dominated our backyard, providing shade for us Smiths, as well as our family dog on many a hot summer day. It was also notable for another reason. After the mulberries would fall to the ground, that summer heat would begin to bake them. And then they would begin to ferment. And the birds would come by, eat them, and drunkenly stagger around until they hit the windows of the house. Between that and just the basic stinking disaster of mulberries all over the backyard, I am sure there are many late-summer days on which my parents longed for that mustard seed-sized faith that would uproot our mulberry tree and plant it in the depths of the sea—or at least Lake Huron.

But it didn't. Summer after summer, the mulberry tree remained. It grew. It flourished. Until one night when my dad and I were out of town and we got a call from my mom, a call that we missed at first. On the way home, we listened to the voicemail. Well, the mulberry tree had finally met its match. Not by prayer or faith or mustard seed. But by the strike of a lightning bolt. The lightning hit the mulberry tree and knocked it through the roof of our backyard patio. So much for our parable today.

That is the way the world works. We are confronted by so many problems. We have had school shootings, police shootings, war, drug epidemics in the world, trips to the hospital in our own

and church families. It doesn't take a lot to see the shadow of death and evil in our world or to smell the festering rot of sin.

How often we might wish that God would do something. How often we might wish for what people like to call "divine intervention," God stepping in and setting things to rights. How often we might wish for God to look at one of those big mulberry tree-sized problems and simply zap it—figuratively or if we're annoyed or scared or angered enough, maybe we really do wish for the Zeus-like God quarterbacking lightning bolts from the sky.

Maybe sometimes God does that. Many of you probably know in your own lives or have friends or have heard stories of miraculous tales of healing, of reconciliation, of the in-breaking of the kingdom.

But so often when I've prayed for that, I've been disappointed. Ever since I was little, I have loved reading the Bible. And I remember a particular time was around the years I was going to church camp in the summer. Around that same time, we lost my 3 remaining grandparents in a span of a couple years. I remember lots of trips to Ohio and back. I remember lots of times where my dad or my mom was gone for a week at a time to take care of their parents. I remember lots of funerals and those funeral luncheons, and the leftover funeral ham sandwiches. But what I remember most was praying.

As much as my mom would try to tell me, "We just need to pray that Nana or Papa or Grandma is going to be at peace," I wanted the lightning God. I wanted God to look at this huge mulberry tree of a problem: even lung cancer, and to zap it. And when I read my Bible, when I read passages like this, I wanted to know what I was doing wrong. I didn't care about moving mulberry trees. I just wanted God to act once in a smaller way. For one person. I wanted to know why I kept praying and my family kept dying. I wanted to know why my faith wasn't big enough.

When I hear Gospel texts like this, it's very easy to feel small. God is so big. The mulberry trees in our lives that we have to overcome are so daunting. And we, what are we? Worthless slaves who are only trying to do what we are told. Forgive, love, serve, pray. Worthless slaves holding out hope that God will give us even a mustard seed-sized amount of faith. "Lord, increase our faith."

But today, I think I feel differently about this passage. Maybe Jesus is chiding the apostles a little bit. And maybe he does the same to us. But I don't think that's the bottom line: I don't think he's saying this to make them feel bad or to say that they're faithless. I think he is trying to open their eyes to see the kingdom.

"Lord, increase our faith," is wrong not because faith is a bad thing, but because if I have the mindset that it's always a matter of *how much faith I have*, I miss all the little miraculous things that God has already done in my life, in the world around me, and on the cross.

The truth is that when God really did change the world, it wasn't through lightning bolts. It wasn't by uprooting a giant tree and planting it in the mighty waters of the sea. But it was by dying on a tree and washing us through the plain waters of baptism.

And yes, it takes a lot of faith to believe that. It takes a lot of faith to believe that Jesus Christ is God, that for us and for our salvation he came down, that he was crucified, died, and was buried, and on the third day rose again. It does take a lot of faith to believe that this Nazarene who died 2000 years ago is going to bring about the kingdom of God in a world writhing in sin and death with mulberry tree-sized problems all around.

But that kind of faith doesn't happen overnight. If it doesn't happen overnight even to apostles to whom Jesus is preaching face-to-face, it won't happen to us overnight either. Instead, it's the mustard seed. It's learning to trust: Through baptism that most of us can't even remember, through those early Bible stories and Sunday school classes, through countless children's sermons, and catechism class, through choir anthems and preaching, through holy communion, and not only that, but also through lived daily experience. Through prayers for small things and big things, prayers answered and prayers unanswered. Through love and marriage, but also through heartbreak. Through the birth of a newborn, but also burying a loved one. It's through seeing those big mulberry tree problems in this world, but seeing even there that there are cracks: cracks where the love of Jesus Christ is breaking through in the best moments, but even shining through the bleakest darkness. And the sprouts of mustard shrubs growing up when and where they are least expected.

Faith is being able to say, "Yes, I am a worthless slave. And yes I have done only what I ought." But at the same time believing that it's precisely through such ordinary, seemingly worthless work: through one act of forgiveness, through one unspoken prayer for another, through consoling one brother or sister in grief, through feeding one hungry person, or through even one small statement of truth and love spoken in the face of the mulberry trees in this world—that the kingdom comes and that this work isn't worthless. That in this work, we see the Spirit germinating the mustard seed of the kingdom, that we see it, sprouting, and growing.

We have this mustard seed faith. We have it because God gave it to us. It was planted and watered in baptism. And the Good News is that we don't have to be like the apostles. We don't have to wait until it grows to maturity to do the work of the kingdom. Right here in our lives—ordinary maybe, but anything but worthless—God is doing amazing things, amazing things that increase his kingdom. The faith God gives us is never too small, and the work he calls us to do is never worthless. We can trust that the one who was faithful to death on the mightiest tree will be faithful to give life to the smallest seed. **Amen.**