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In Christ. A New Creation.

“The Mighty Mustard Seed”

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Luke 17: 1-6

This little story from the Gospels is proof that Jesus had a sense of humor. Ever since the day he called his disciples, Jesus had been trying to show them what it means to live a life of faith in God. He had been healing the sick, inviting the outcast to dinner, teaching people how to forgive, showing people how to share their resources -- their food, their money, their compassion. Put another way, he had been trying to show them how faith can mend what is broken and redeem what was lost, how it can break down barriers between people and open doors to new possibilities, how it calls people to risk themselves for the sake of others, how it creates new lives and new communities.

But here, in this little encounter in the 17th chapter of Luke, the disciples reach a crisis point. Perhaps it was a cumulative effect that had come from watching Jesus in action, seeing him teach and heal, sensing his self-assurance, being aware of his bold words and courageous actions. Perhaps it came from hearing him tell the parables of the Prodigal Son, Unjust Steward, and the Rich Man and Lazarus, (which can be found in the previous two chapters), and feeling their stinging challenge to the status quo and conventional wisdom. Maybe it was that they were drawing nearer to Jerusalem and they sensed the growing tension in the air as the religious and political authorities began to take notice of Jesus' ministry and begin to plot how they could put a stop to his subversive activity.

Perhaps it was Jesus' warning, given just a few verses earlier, that “temptations to sin are sure to come.” Or his even more dire prediction that those who caused others to sin would probably prefer being drown in the sea, mafia-style, with a millstone around their neck, than receive the kind of punishment God had in store for them.

But whatever it was, the disciples had reached a point of crisis, a crisis not unlike that reached by the people of Israel as they followed Moses out of Egypt and into the wilderness, as we heard in the reading from Exodus earlier. They knew they were on a journey and they had thought it a journey of great promise, a liberating journey. But now they weren't so sure.

And so they pleaded: “Increase our faith!” “Give us what you’ve got,” they told Jesus. “We feel so inadequate, so unprepared, so devoid of the spiritual strength we think we need to possess. Help us out! Give us more faith.”

So, given the disciples’ desperation and their utter sense of inadequacy, you might have thought Jesus would have grabbed hold of this wonderful “teaching moment,” as educators call it, and given them a whole lecture on prayer, Bible study, attendance at synagogue, paths of spiritual development, complete with bibliographical supplements and several books and articles for further reading.

But he didn’t.

Instead, he told them they needed to have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed.

Now, how many of you have ever seen a mustard seed?

OK. Well, for those of you who never have, I just happen to have brought along with me a box of samples. And I’m going to pass them around and I want each one of you to take one of these mustard seeds in your hand and hold on to it for the rest of this sermon. [PASS OUT SEEDS.]

This, my friends, is what Jesus was referring to when he told them how much faith they needed for the crises at hand.

This is a joke, see? The disciples say, “Increase our faith!” and Jesus says, “Your faith needs to be the size of a grain of a mustard seed.”

Look at that mustard seed. The size of this mustard seed tells us that we don’t need to have the mind of some great theologian, like Karl Barth. Or the huge heart of Mother Theresa. Or the incredible courage of Martin Luther King, Jr. Or the deep prayer life of Dr. Syngman Rhee. No. We just need to be ourselves, and find that grain of mustard seed faith within ourselves that allows us to live with courage and conviction, with humility and hope.

This mustard seed is inviting us to do a small thing with big consequences: place our trust in God. It’s asking us to forget momentarily our inadequacies and failures, and place our lives in the hands of the God whose mercy outlasts our sin. This little mustard seed is telling us to put aside our well-honed sense of what’s possible and impossible, what’s inevitable and what’s unlikely, and put our trust in the power of God’s love. This tiny mustard seed is calling us to stop living as though our lives and the life of the world are never going to change, and start living instead as though we belong to the One who raised Jesus from the dead.

You know, when we’re young, mustard seed faith may be a matter of beginning to believe in God and therefore a bit more in ourselves as God’s agents in the world. It may be that for a teenager or other young person just starting out on their own, mustard seed faith may be the act of trusting that God has a purpose for your life and then placing your life in God’s hands. That’s powerful and freeing. Because life becomes more than what your friends think about you, more than the coolest clothes, more than the latest CD or DVD, or who’s dating who and who likes who. Life gets larger and you yourself

come more into focus. Suddenly there's a place for you, and a purpose, and a God who cares, who calls and listens, who can inspire and guide you. That's powerful and freeing.

But, mustard seed faith is not just for the young. About 20 years ago, millions of people were reading Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For*.¹ The book sold more than 30 million copies and was translated into 56 different languages.

And why was it so popular? Well, the people who picked it up were folks who for years – maybe their whole lives -- have been pursuing things, whether success or wealth or recognition, or maybe just the good old American Dream. And suddenly, or perhaps gradually, they reached a point where a kind of emptiness set in. They thought they knew what life was all about – getting ahead, making money, settling down, raising a family, having the latest in technology, tasting the good life, giving our children the best of everything. But then, what used to satisfy, to motivate, to energize was no longer there.

Maybe they felt spiritually dry, or maybe just plain boredom. Paraphrasing the Book of Proverbs, Warren notes that “The life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree.”(11:28) That is a way to think about mustard seed faith.

You know, it seems the older we get, and the more of life we see, and the more we experience of the world, the more convinced we become about life's limits, about the immutability of human nature and the inevitability of politics and business, and even of history itself. Somehow, over time, we quietly convince ourselves that very little can change. And if we're not careful, we can drift into cynicism and bitterness, and gradually we withdraw more and more from life itself, and take a pass on the challenges and opportunities life puts in front of us. For too many of us, the older we become, the more we drain the adventure and surprise from our lives.

Mustard seed faith is for us, too; not just for the young. Mustard seed faith is required no matter our age or the circumstance of our lives.

I'm a great fan of baseball. I always get excited about the World Series every October. Back in the 1980s there was a baseball pitcher named Dan Quisenberry. Back then, he pitched for the Kansas City Royals and was the best American League relief pitcher there was. As a relief pitcher he regularly saved three or four dozen games every season, and allowed the opposing team to score very few runs. In 1985, his pitching helped the Kansas City Royals win the World Series.

He was very competitive, but also very gentle, and especially very funny. He said things like, “The future is a lot like the present, only longer.”

Sadly, Dan Quisenberry died of a malignant brain tumor when he was only 45.

But Dan Quisenberry faced death like he faced tough hitters in the bottom of the ninth. He told people that being diagnosed with brain cancer was “like getting new eyes.

¹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Are We Here For* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2002).

So in an way, it's a gift." "Every day," he said, "I find things to be thankful for." "There have been some real hard times," he admitted, "but it's also been a lot of tender mercies."²

I think Dan Quisenberry had mustard seed faith, not just at his dying, but throughout his life. I think his mustard seed faith gave him his sense of humor and his personal discipline as a ballplayer, as well as his great courage and hopeful spirit in the face of death.

It's never too late to begin. Mustard seed faith is the act of trusting that "God can accomplish through the power at work in us far more than all we can ask or even imagine." (Ephesians 4:20)

If we expect faith to shield us from doubt, disappointment, disillusionment, and especially from suffering and death, we have missed the point. Faith gives us a unique perspective, ground upon which to stand, a path upon which we can walk, a light to help us find the way. Whatever life puts in front of us, faith shows us which way to go, and sees us through to the other side.

Look at that mustard seed. Now ask yourself: What tree am I going to uproot and replant? What mountain am I going to move? A little faith can go a long way. What journey are you going to set out on this day? AMEN.

² *The Washington Post*, January 20, 1998, Section C1.