

Sermon, October 9, 2022

Luke 17:5-19

“Mulberry Trees and Mountains  
Jesus and the Lepers”

In this morning's readings we focus on the issue of faith. To start with, we see that Jesus liked to use a mustard seed as a metaphor for faith. In the 17th chapter of Matthew, the disciples ask Jesus why they were unable to cast out a demon. He replies, “Because of your little faith. For truly if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you”. That must have stung for the disciples! A mustard seed is one of the smallest of seeds, so to say that they have little faith - well, it sounds like he is saying that their faith is smaller than small.

I have often asked myself, if you are not moving any mountains, what does that say about your faith? Of course, Jesus is also using a mountain as a metaphor. We usually don't have the need to be shifting mountains around - especially here in Florida. The mountain refers to the biggest of problems or challenges, which if we have just so much faith we can solve or overcome. But that raises another question for me. Just how do you measure faith? How much faith is equal to the size of a mustard seed? And just what is faith? Is it belief? Is it trust, or maybe both? The book of Hebrews describes it as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. Perhaps that means having the ability to see possibility where possibility does not seem to exist.

Kierkegaard pointed out that God exists beyond logic, proof, or reason - that what is needed is taking a “leap of faith” i.e., trusting in God, especially where logic, proof, or reason are not to be found, clinging to the assurance and conviction of things hoped for and/or not seen.

Here it seems that faith has something to do with the absence of doubt, but then it has been pointed out by some that faith and doubt are not necessarily contrary to one another - that struggling with doubt is a part of what helps faith grow or mature. Paul Tillich described faith and doubt as two sides of the same coin. Perhaps our faith expands in size over time as a result of that inner struggle.

In the 13th chapter of Luke, Jesus describes the kingdom of God as being like a mustard seed. He says, “It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches”. Maybe it is the same with faith. It is like a mustard seed in the sense that is first small, but then, with the proper nurture, it too grows in size. Assurances and convictions become stronger and enduring. We

may continually need to take the leap on a daily basis, but with each descent into the abyss our trust in God matures.

Now, in today's reading, when the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, he says, "if you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea, it would obey you'". Again, it relates to seeing possibility where possibility does not seem to exist. But, if you think about it, there is something a little absurd about this teaching. Why would anyone want to replant a tree in the Ocean! There is no way the tree could grow, or even continue to exist! What that says to me is that sometimes our faith can be misguided. It brings to mind the saying, "Be careful what you wish for, you may get it!" It also brings to mind the so-called 'prosperity gospel'. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not intended to be a formula for financial gain!

Now jumping down to the story of the ten lepers. They call out to Jesus, asking for mercy. He tells them to go and show themselves to the priests. But only one of them returns to offer thanksgiving to Jesus. Luke makes a point of mentioning that the man was a Samaritan - a people despised by the Jews at that time. It certainly shows that God is not discriminating as to who he will show mercy. But take note of the other nine. The text says, "And as they went, they were made clean." They may have been guilty of ingratitude, but they certainly were not devoid of faith. They obeyed Jesus and proceeded to go show themselves to the priests before they were healed. They made the leap of faith. Their trust in Jesus was such that they knew they would be made clean by the time they reached the priests. We too are sometimes in need of taking the leap knowing God is there to catch us, so to speak, and by believing in a positive outcome regardless of what currently lies before us. Amen.

**Let us pray:** God of grace and mercy, we thank you for this beautiful day and all the blessing that come with it. Help us to make the best of each day as we move forward in life and help us to better understand your will for us. Grant to us the gift of faith - help it to grow day by day. Sometimes we do have doubts but let us use those times as a way to deal with the questions before us - and May such inner struggle deepen our trust in you. May we look to your Son Jesus Christ and be open to the guidance of your Holy Spirit.

As always, we lift up those in need of your help and healing...Amen.