

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, October 7, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 17:5-10

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, this is not the only place in Scripture that the mustard seed is mentioned, but it is interesting. It comes in a place where the disciples say, “Increase our faith.” What is mustard-seed faith? What is all that about? I think it means they had at least a little belief in God, at least a little living out of that belief, and at least a little thankfulness for what God has done for us. Sometimes we do have a very little of each.

I want to share with you a story that did not go over very well this morning. We’ll see if you listen more carefully than they did. It’s the saddest and the funniest and the truest story I think I’ve ever heard about our relationship to God. One day, a mother and her eight-year-old daughter were walking along the beach by the seashore, and all of a sudden, a huge wave came up and engulfed the daughter and drug her out to sea, and there was no sign of her! The woman immediately started screaming and shaking her fist at the heavens, and said, “Lord, this is my only daughter, and I can have no other children! She is the love of my life! If you return her to me, I will serve You all my days!” All at once, another big wave, and her daughter was deposited right there on the beach, safe and sound. The mother looked at her, and then gazed up at Heaven, and said, “She had a hat!”

No matter what God does for us, our belief, our faith, and our thankfulness tend to be mustard-seed sized. The great gifts and the grand gestures come from God, and we respond with mustard-seed sized faith and maybe that’s okay. Every relationship has to start somewhere, and faith for most of us starts small like a seed.

I’m reminded of what the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, they use a seed as an analogy of this life, and then on to the next by saying that the seed you bury in the ground is nothing like the plant which comes up. Unless you are a botanist or one of our master gardeners, you can scarcely guess just by looking at a puny little seed what it is that will come up when you plant it in good soil. The seed is transformed into something entirely new and wonderful and such is faith, even small, dim, insignificant faith can make things happen, can grow into something you cannot imagine, and bear fruit that you would have never guessed.

None of us, I believe, has ever seen a burning bush from which God spoke or heard a voice booming from Heaven or seen laws written in rock, but we all have experienced something, and that is why we are here. There is buried within us echoing in our souls and almost unnoticed, but always there, a still, small voice. A seed planted in our consciousness that life was meant for more than this. There is indeed something lacking in my life, something the world cannot give, something, which cannot be bought or owned, but only God can give us. Faith grows up and out of this implanted still, small voice. Faith grows up and out of the thankfulness for what God has done and is doing in

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our lives. This time of year, too often, we talk about faith as raising money for budgets. That’s not it. Faith is about raising our consciousness to see that life is more than money and more than tears and more than years and then we die.

Life, our life, is made to be a relationship with God and to echo out God’s love and our thankfulness to others. Faith starts small, and faith can be infected with doubts. The disciples said, “Lord, increase our faith.” Real doubts, and sometimes there can be self-serving doubts. I think we know the difference. There are real doubts and struggles and crises, and then there are the manufactured doubts that we use to serve ourselves rather than God. I believe that we all know the difference.

We have reason to believe in, to trust in, and to be thankful to God, but it costs us time. It costs us treasure. It costs us talent to respond, so some of us, some of the time, manufacture reasons why we need not worship, need not give, and need not serve with thankful hearts. Our faith is still there in the background, but small and still a seed, not yet transformed into what it shall be.

John Wesley, we read in his diary, had real doubts, but he served and he preached and he did for God just as if he had none! He did not let himself off the hook in any way just because he struggled with doubt. Even the tiny mustard seed faith he had was enough to convince him that the purpose of life was to serve God rather than his own wandering desires. He lived and worked and gave to build up God’s kingdom – not his own. So he kept serving until his cold heart grew warm and his faith was transformed from a potential thing into a real and vital thing.

The seed within you, which you cannot ignore forever, is felt as a God-given hunger for meaning. You may not experience that hunger for meaning as a gift because God will, if you have not found out by now, God will disappoint you with one thing after another until you are led to a crisis where you must choose whom to trust, whom to serve, and answer the question will it be God or will it be someone or something smaller? It is just that hunger for meaning, which in itself is a kind of faith, that hunger which disappoints us in things and possessions and prestige until we eventually find ourselves at God’s feet on our knees, and we say, Okay, I give up! Take my life and let it be, as the hymn says, consecrated Lord to thee. Take my silver and my gold, not a mite will I withhold, take me. The Old Testament imagery says as a potter takes the clay and makes me, mold me into something wonderful and new.

The mere seed of faith is enough to set us on a journey toward God, but when faith takes root and grows, it changes us. Only you can answer the question, am I changing? If nothing you have read or heard or done has lifted your heart up to God and given you a certain lightness and sense of freedom and compassion for others and a desire to give and forgive, if your faith does not do these things for you, what good is it?

Wesley said, “That sort of potential faith is like painted fire. It gives no warmth.” Real faith gives real relationship up to God and out to others. It lives out your thankfulness to

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God. Small faith, painted fire, doing it even before you feel it though, it is a kind of faith, though a small one. God can and has done great things through people who had only the smallest sort of faith, but were willing to act on even that.

No better recent example can be had of that than Mother Teresa. She left letters showing doubts and fears, but she never let her doubts and fears stop her from acting on the little faith she had growing within her. She never used her doubts or fears as an excuse to do nothing. It is astounding if you’ve read some of her letters or communications. Just eleven weeks before receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, she said to a priest, “Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness are so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.” Other letters revealed that for the last 50 years of her life, she felt very little presence of God, but she continued to work among the poor and the sick in Calcutta determined that they should be loved before they died. Yet she wrote while doing it, “So many unanswered questions live within me, afraid to uncover them because of the blasphemy, if there be a God, please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convincing emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives, and hurt my very soul.” She wrote again later, “Please pray especially for me that I may not spoil His work, that I may not spoil His work, and that our Lord may show Himself where there is such terrible darkness within me as if everything were dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started the work.” She asked others to pray for her to the God, and she prayed to the God she doubted, even in that doubt, there was faith. A year after those words, she wrote, “Such deep longing for God, and repulsed, empty – no faith, no love, no zeal – saving souls holds no attraction, Heaven means nothing, pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything.”

Faith overcoming doubt and emptiness. The disciples’ request was, “Increase our faith in Jesus,” and my reading doesn’t seem to really answer their request. I wish Jesus had given the disciples a three-point program or a 12-step process to get from where we are to where we ought to be. He did not. He did promise, as the children’s sermon mentioned today, the Holy Spirit, God the Spirit, would be present with us to lead us on and to give us comfort as we struggle and grow. We are not alone. He did not promise instant and complete faith, but He did say if you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, amazing things can happen through us.

Faith the size of a mustard seed can change reality, and it has changed reality through the life of doubting, but thankful Wesley, doubting, but thankful Mother Teresa. Don’t worry so much about how much faith you have. Concentrate on being faithful. Faith is not so much something you have, as it is something you live. Why? Because deep in your heart you have that God-given dissatisfaction that there must be something more. Life was not intended to be so disconnected, so empty. Deep in your heart, you hear that still, small voice persistently telling us there is something more than accumulating things until we die. Deep within, we know we were made for a relationship that lasts. We were made to be in relationship with God and to live out our thankfulness with others with compassion in a thankless world.

“Faith Starts Small”

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How much does God want us, and how far will God go to show us how much He loves us? Here on the altar, here is meaning. God loved you this much. The body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, God gave you the need. God gave you the seed. God gave you Himself. Now, how will you respond? Please don't wait for the perfect feeling or for the perfect faith. Act on the faith that you have.

On this World Communion Sunday, we recognize that God is at work in the world for good even among those who at the moment don't realize it or don't feel a certainty of faith. We seek to hear the word of God for our time, for our place, even though it may disturb and unsettle us, it may cost us time, talent, treasure, because we believe that God's purposes will lead us beyond ourselves and create new life that we could not otherwise imagine. Amen.