

Lamentations 1:1-6

Psalm 137

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

What in the world can anyone possibly say about one of the world's most well-known Biblical parables that hasn't been said before? People all over the world and in every walk of life...from every religion and from no religion at all are familiar with the parable of the mustard seed. There's nothing new to say here, right? We've heard it. We've heard it all our lives and we get it. If we have faith the size of a mustard seed...a little tiny, almost invisible little seed...we can perform super-human, extraordinary miracles. Right? That's what it says. In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus says that if you have just that small amount of faith you can move mountains. In the gospel of Luke, that we just heard this morning, Jesus says that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can tell a mulberry bush to pull itself out of the ground and be planted in the sea. And it will do it. Well, I can't do that and I'd be willing to bet that you can't do that either. So does that mean that our faith is so small that it's not even as big as the miniscule, barely visible mustard seed? Probably not.

The danger in interpreting this parable the way most of us always have is that it is so easy to slip into the Prosperity Gospel. The Prosperity Gospel is an interpretation of the Gospel that maintains that God wants all of us to be healthy, wealthy, wise and successful in this life. If we are all of those things, it's tantamount to having tangible proof that we have been blessed by God. This was a perspective well-maintained even in Jesus' day and Jesus debunked it every chance he got. So, if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can make sure that we are healthy, wealthy and wise just by praying for such things. Right? Probably not.

We can also fall into a trap of despair. If we are not able to uproot mulberry bushes or move mountains, does that mean that we just don't have enough faith? And if we pray for healing from an illness or relief from some personal tragedy or the resolution of some worldwide problem that seems to threaten us and none of those things happen, does it mean we are lacking in faith? Probably not. But isn't that what Jesus said? "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can uproot a mulberry bush and plant it in the sea." Yes. That's what he said. But maybe he didn't mean what we think he meant. Maybe what he said and what we heard is not the same. If that's the case, what on earth DID he mean?

We are not superheroes and faith doesn't turn us into one. Let's take a look at the context in which Jesus uses this parable and see if we can figure out what he's trying to teach us. We have

been walking with him on his way to Jerusalem. We have been listening to him teach and preach and we have been learning about miracles he has performed. And we have listened to what he wants us to know about what God wants from us and for us. Sometimes his audience is a mixture of Pharisees and disciples and random followers. Sometimes, it's just the disciples. For this parable, his audience is just the disciples. Jesus is teaching them the fine points of their mission and the parameters of the kingdom of God. He's telling them...and us...what he's commanding of them if they are to help usher in the kingdom of God and if they are going to be residents in the kingdom. He's given them a tough list of commands...tougher than they think they can handle. He wants them to avoid making a new believer stumble on the way to developing their own faith...either in their own conduct or in how they treat the new believer. And he wants them to forgive perpetually...over and over again...unlimited and on a daily basis. The disciples are looking at Jesus and saying, "If you want us to do all that then....give us more faith!!" They know full well that they can't live perfect lives and they can't give unlimited forgiveness. They're going to need more strength...so they ask for more faith.

Perhaps Jesus' reply is actually not critical of the disciples, very loving and very reassuring. Perhaps he's not scolding them about having too little faith. Perhaps he's encouraging them. You don't need more faith he seems to be saying. You have enough...even if all you have is a little bitty smidgen of faith...as small as a tiny mustard seed...you can do more than you think you can. If we look at the original story written in Greek, we can see that 'size of a mustard seed' can also be translated 'as a mustard seed' or 'like a mustard seed.' If you have faith like a mustard seed.....The mustard seed will eventually be a huge shrub...large enough to house birds. The seed is big enough to do that even though it is miniscule. The seed does what it is designed to do and becomes a huge shrub. Perhaps Jesus is telling the disciples...and us...that when we are given the faith in Christ...because it is a gift from God...we are given all we need to have in order to become part of the kingdom of God...we have been designed for that when we became Christians. Our faith is not based in ourselves as Christians or in our own abilities, but in the one whose servant we are, Jesus Christ. Our sense of faith is in Jesus Christ and it is a faith that mirrors the faith of Christ himself. The only time we get tripped up is when we think of our faith as separated from the One we believe in...Jesus. It's not.

Jesus follows this up with the description of the Master and the servant. When the servant comes in from the field, the Master commands him to prepare food and serve it. The Master doesn't wait on the servant, although Jesus has certainly been servant to all of us. The servant does as the Master has commanded, just as Jesus did what God commanded of him and we are to do as Jesus commands us. The little mustard seed didn't question how it was going to become of huge shrub, it simply did what it was commanded to do and eventually it became the shrub. Jesus is saying, "Do what has been commanded of you and you will do miraculous things on your way to the kingdom of God."

Jesus commands us to do certain things to demonstrate the kingdom of God to others...to help prepare the way for the kingdom of God to come into being. Every single time we do one of the things that Jesus has commanded us to do, we bear witness to someone else...perhaps to a new believer or a non-believer or a believer of longstanding...about what the kingdom of God will be like. Every time we follow Jesus' commands...even if we're tired or we don't want to or we don't see the point...we take one step closer to preparing ourselves for the kingdom of God as well. Our faith in Jesus is not tied to our success as we go along. It is tied to the end result...the establishment of the kingdom of God, which is under God's control. We are simply God's servants doing as God has commanded.

Our prayer, then, is not that we will get what we want. Our prayer then is that we will do as Jesus has commanded us to do...that we will have the resolve to do that; the insight to know what the commandment is; the determination to do that. For Jesus did not only set the bar very high in commanding that we do nearly impossible things, he also pointed to the way of grace. He's put these difficult tasks before us and commanded that we do them, knowing that in many cases we will fail. But Jesus not only points the way to the kingdom of God he also provides the way to grace. We can not earn our way into heaven by being perfect. We are not required to be perfect. The grace of God's love is that we are required to try and to try very hard. The grace of God's love is that we have the intent to fulfill all the commandments that Jesus set before us, even as we know that we will probably fall short. And when we fall short, we are still loved and we are forgiven even as we have learned how to forgive others.

Faith is not something stockpiled in a warehouse. It cannot be measured; it can only be enacted. It is not real until it is acted upon. It's sort of like the nature of love. Love isn't love until it's given away. Faith and its growth are not to be gained by human efforts, but are gifts from God. And God has taught us to ask for what we need. If we need more faith God will give it to us. Faith equals wholehearted trust; the more we are willing to trust, the greater our faith becomes...the more of God's gift of faith we are able to absorb and use and share.

The goal is not perfection. The goal is in the trying. The goal is in the effort. The goal is in the intent. The goal is in the learning. The goal is in the loving of Jesus Christ. The goal is in the trust. And God provides us with all we need to reach the goal.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.