

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**October 3, 2021, The 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/The 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

**WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY**

Psalm 26; Luke 17:5-10

**A CONDITION ACCORDING TO FACT**

Do you remember when the new I-74 bridge seemed like a dream that would never come true? When I moved here in the fall of 2002, I was told stories of the new bridge, and the many places it might go. I can remember about 3 years ago getting onto the old bridge from State Street in Iowa and seeing the first picture of the new bridge. It looked like a futuristic dream.

Wednesday I drove across the new bridge and thought about that small poster at the side of the road and the reality it has become.

After so many years of stories about a new bridge it was hard to have faith that a new bridge would ever appear. But there it is now, changing the look of the Quad Cities and that crossing over the Mississippi River! Sometimes it's hard to have faith.

The disciples were talking to Jesus about the life of faith, and asked him about what happens when someone in the community of faith sins against you, and Jesus told them: "and if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I'm sorry,' you must forgive." This sounded impossible to them and they said to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" 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." (Luke 17:5-6)

No wonder the disciples asked for more faith, living that kind of forgiveness sounded pretty much impossible, more impossible than a new I-74 Bridge.

It's no surprise that the disciples often asked Jesus for more faith. And I don't know about you, but there have been so many times in these past 19 months that I have asked for more faith, more trust, more endurance in this life of faith in the face of all the changes and uncertainties we are living through. I think I have had many glimpses of what the disciples must have been feeling when they pleaded: "Lord, increase our faith!"

But for me, I've always had a problem with the story of the mustard seed, because this story has always left me feeling guilty.

It's felt as if Jesus was judging them, and judging me. I felt like I could hear his tone of voice when he said "if you only had faith the size of a mustard seed you could do unbelievable things like uprooting a tree and sending it into the sea, or forgiving someone over and over again."

But then a few years ago I learned to hear this story about Jesus with new ears and I'm excited to share that good news with you. I learned that this isn't a passage about judgment but about hope and encouragement. But to get there we have to spend a minute with some Greek grammar, but please bear with me because I think it's worth it.

A member of a preaching group I used to be in explained to us that in Koine Greek, the Greek language that the New Testament is written in, there were two ways of making statements that begin with "if."

(Midrash 9-29-16, The Rev. Pam Laing)

One way of using "if" is to state something that isn't true, for example: if the sky is green, if I am you, if all churches are Presbyterian. And hearing these "if" statements you know that the sky is not green, but blue, and I am not you, and there are many churches besides Presbyterian. You know these "if" statements aren't based on something that is true, they speak to "*a condition different than fact,*" to give you the technical term.

The other kind of "if" statement, in New Testament Greek, expresses something that is true "*a condition according to fact.*" For example: if the earth rotates around the sun, if the sun rises in the east, if Jesus is our Savior: And hearing those "if" statements you know that the earth *does* rotate around the sun, the sun rises in the east, and Jesus is our Savior. These are "if" statements based on something that is true, "*a condition according to fact.*"

It was this second kind of "if" statement that Jesus was using with his disciples. When he said: "if you had faith the size of a mustard seed," he was telling his disciples then, and telling us now this morning, that we *do* have enough faith,  
we *do* have faith the size of a mustard seed.

And that is a big enough faith, to live the life of faith.

Jesus wasn't making fun of the disciples, or judging them and putting them down and saying you don't have enough faith, he was encouraging them, and saying you do have enough faith. You have faith the size of a mustard seed. And that's a big enough faith to do amazing things.

I love that Jesus used the image of a tiny mustard seed to tell them about their faith. Now if you haven't seen a mustard seed before, they are not much bigger than the head of a pin. They are tiny. And Jesus' disciples would have known that within that tiny seed was the potential of a mustard tree that could grow up to 20 feet tall.

In fact, in Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus say: ... "*The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.*" (Matthew 13: 31-32)

So, what happens when we let this good news about our big enough faith sink in?  
What happens when you let yourself take hope and confidence in the small mustard seed faith that you have?  
What happens when you let yourself know the potential of your small faith; your small faith that is big enough?

Let yourself imagine a small, tiny mustard seed in your hand (pause),

Really, imagine a small mustard seed in the palm of your hand!

And then let yourself feel the good news that that speck of faith is big enough to live out the life of faith.

Take a moment, look at that imaginary seed in the palm of your hand, and sit with this idea: your small mustard seed faith is a big enough faith.

PAUSE

This means we can let ourselves be encouraged and hopeful about our life of faith.  
 Within our small faith is the potential to move trees into the sea, to build bridges, and even more:

Within our small faith is the ability  
 to forgive,  
 to love,  
 to pray,  
 to care for strangers,  
 to love and pray for enemies,  
 to hope,  
 to bring justice,  
 to work for peace,  
 to trust Jesus' love,  
 to follow in Jesus' footsteps,  
 to live the life of faith.

Jesus' words this morning are there to encourage us to know that we have a big enough faith to live the life of faith, even and especially in the midst of a world pandemic.

We don't need lots and lots of faith, we already have enough mustard seed sized faith, for the faithful living of these days.

And on this World Communion Sunday, let us remember that we, with our mustard seed faith, are connected by Jesus' love to Christians around this sanctuary and around the globe with their mustard seed faith.

On this Sunday, in time zones behind us and time zones in front of us, God's children have and will, gather around communion tables and break breads in all different shapes and sizes and grains and will hear Jesus' promises spoken in hundreds of languages: "This is my body broken for you, do this in remembrance of me."

And they will drink grape juice and wine from chalices, and small plastic glasses and paper cups and Jesus' words will echo into cathedrals, and sanctuaries, and churches without walls and windows, "This is the cup of the new covenant, sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins, whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me."

In this sanctuary, and around the world today we will gather together in the name of Jesus, and we will share the meal that reminds us that:

Jesus lived on earth for us,  
 Jesus died on the cross for us  
 Jesus was raised from death to new life for us,  
 And Jesus now reigns in heaven, holding us moment by moment in his love.

At this Communion Table, in the gift and mystery of Jesus' love,  
 we will be connected to his heart,  
 to the heart of God,  
 and to the hearts and lives of our brothers and sisters around the globe.

Together our mustard seed faiths will be fed and nurtured and united together.

Then in the gift and mystery of Jesus' love,  
all of us with our small mustard seed faiths  
will be sent out of worship into God's world  
to use our big enough faith together  
to forgive,  
to love,  
to pray,  
to care for strangers,  
to love and pray for enemies,  
to hope,  
to bring justice,  
to work for peace,  
to trust Jesus' love,  
to follow in Jesus' footsteps, and  
to live the life of faith.

May it be so in your life and in mine, with our great big mustard seed faith! Amen!