

MUSTARD SEED COMMUNION – October 7, 2007 Luke 17:5-10

Planting a bulb or a seed in the autumn is an act of faith. Given good seed-starter soil, appropriate depth and a good, cold winter, many a seed will germinate in the springtime and become a tree sapling. With patience, it can then be lovingly coaxed into a full-fledged tree. The life cycle in the garden continues always, of new birth and of dying. So does Jesus speak also of the uprooted tree, floating on the lake, because faith encapsulates the entire life cycle, that being born and growing, that of growing old, and dying.

So it is on an Autumn morning in October, with leaves on trees turning bright orange and falling to the ground, we may find ourselves stunned and stung, not only by the beauty of Autumn, but also by the seemingly-sudden loss of beloved ones who have been so long among us. Taking their leave from us of late – Sue Cressey's birth mother, Jaime, our beloved bass soloist and master gardener, Dave Herald, who passed away last Tuesday afternoon at Crista, surrounded by his immediate family, and now too, our dear, sweet friend, Jessie Paterson, who passed away quietly in bed at Ida Culver House early Friday morning.

And yet as ever, we who live by faith are simultaneously conscious of seeds of new life being spread even now, and coming among us. We recently hosted the area UCC First Sunday youth. We are preparing for another year of Faith Formation, or preparation for Confirmation, for Jr. High-aged youth, which will include Andy Studyvin and Taylor Elder. With assistance from our new youth coordinator, EleenAnn Chiddix, and Rev. Deanna Murray, pastor of Prospect UCC on Capitol Hill, I will be co-leading this year's faith formation program on Sunday evenings this Fall and next year, beginning two weeks from today, on October 21. Our Sunday Club plans are well underway too, and God-willing, we'll soon be welcoming a number of enthusiastic volunteers to assist. We'll also freshly reintroduce all of you to the "Youth in Our Midst" at the upcoming coffee hour forum on October 28. Meanwhile too, we are exploring our UCC heritage on Monday nights, with Rev. Gail Crouch leading us, and we're learning what our faith past has to offer us in terms of our faith future.

Seeds are being planted right now, continually. And those we plant today are of the same seed stock that once long ago were germinating when the Apostle Paul was in prison, praising the young disciple, Timothy for replanting the seed, the seed of faith planted in his grandmother, Lois, passed down to him through his mother Eunice, and so on, and so on.

2 Timothy is, a very uplifting love letter to a young Christian. In it, one senses a true flowering of that mustard seed faith Jesus spoke of: a healthy, fully-grown faith-family tree has developed, and will live on for generations.

Jesus' parable in Luke is about a bare kernel, a bulb, a tiny seed of faith, and how, to faithless ones, it just doesn't seem like enough. It remains, as another of our great hymns puts it, "In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be; from the past will come the future what it holds a mystery...unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see." Unrevealed until its season. Yet Jesus praises its latent abundance.

"Our actions, more than words define how love's example feeds a greater love, for love divine bursts forth from smallest seeds... ."

On Friday, when I first got word about Jessie's passing, after making the necessary calls, and communicating with her immediate family, I realized almost immediately how sad I was feeling. I know too that many of you felt the same, hearing of Dave's passing. It's not that

we don't know that to die is often a welcome and a good thing, and yet the quality of friendship that many of us had with these persons is impossible to quantify. It feels like a great and a very real loss, and so it is right and good that we feel sad. But when and to the extent our grief overwhelms us, we may wish, as did Jesus' disciples, to be given more faith.

Sometimes just getting up in the morning is an act of faith, don't you think? I usually grab some coffee, and sometimes too-soon start to read the paper or listen to the early-morning airing of Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now* radio program on 91.3 FM. And sometimes I find it hard to take in all that is so real and so horrible about life...and I say, in effect, to myself (and to God), 'O God, I wish I had more faith!' "Give me more of whatever it takes to strap another day on my back and haul it around till bedtime. More faith, dear God." Please! Give me more!

To be even more specific about my domestic morning routine *every* morning when I lay the newspaper out on the kitchen table is this: our kitty cat Max climbs up onto it, waves his tail over my coffee cup a few times, sits right down on the part of the paper I'm trying to read, and starts to meow. Whether his food bowl is full or empty, Max always meows at me in the morning. He seems to be saying, give me more, please, give me more! Pay no attention to those other needy cases in faraway lands! I'm your neighbor in need, right here, on top of your breakfast table! Pay attention to me! "The apostles were cats like that; they came to Jesus and meowed for more too. "More faith?" replies Jesus. "You're not using the faith you've got! Why, if the faith you had now were only as big as a mustard seed, you could put it to work planting mulberry trees in the Mediterranean! You could tell a huge sycamore to go jump in a lake. You could do whatever needs to be done, and more!"

(Gallup paraphrase) "It's as if the Jesus' fearers thought faith could be had by the pound, like so much red meat. But faith's not like red meat; it's not "a warehouse of expendable resources, not a nonrenewable fossil fuel that has to be hoarded and fought over and priced to make some people rich. Faith's a whole other way of seeing and being. It can't be quantified. And since that's the case, Jesus changes the subject, from faith as quantity to faith as quality. He does so by telling this not-so-attractive story about a master and a field hand.

Luke 17:7-10 – "Suppose one of you has a slave who comes in from plowing the field or tending the sheep. Would you take his coat, set the table, and say, 'Sit down and eat'? Wouldn't you be more likely to say, 'Prepare dinner, change your clothes and wait table for me until I've finished my coffee; then go to the kitchen and have your supper'? Does a servant get special thanks for doing what's expected of him? It's the same with you. When you've done everything expected of you, be matter-of-fact and say, 'The work is done. What we were told to do, we did.'"

Now I have to say: I'm not crazy about the examples Jesus uses to make his point. I don't like it that Jesus talks about a tree getting uprooted, and then, adding injury to insult, he talks so matter-of-factly about slaves – the Peterson version says 'servants', but what he really references is slaves – I'd rather he'd come right out and said that slavery is wrong. Jesus' teachings clearly lead society in that direction, but his parable-telling style is more subtle than that – he likes to surprise us with unexpected turns in his stories, always using imagery drawn from the life of first century Palestine as it was then being lived. Slavery was very much a part of everyday life in those days. Bt this known norm of slave-master inequality is only the background scenery. So he states it as a matter of fact: slaves are expected to do as they're told! Jesus asks, in effect, "Which of you upper middle class folks,

who have employees or subordinates, say unto them when they've finished their days work, 'come on in to my office, take your shoes off, put your feet up here on my desk, and let me whip you up some nice tall lattes or maybe a pitcher of martinis? Now that would not be prudent, would it? Might cause role confusion...Or status anxiety. Or drunkenness. After all, the boss is the boss, right? And workers, hey, they're expected to do their work, nothing more, nothing less.

But please don't get confused. Jesus is not talking about the way we're *supposed* to act toward servants and slaves, or 'gophers and flunkies'. Jesus is talking about faith, faith as vocation, faith as a lifestyle, faith as a way to walk through our always-challenging, sometimes grief-stricken work in the world as Christian people. Faith, you see, is not something done to get merit badges. You don't volunteer – you don't give to Neighbors in Need – you don't pledge to your church in order to gain praise from anybody. You do it because it's just what's expected of faithful people! Faith, acted out. And, knowing whom we serve, we serve aware that our acted-out faith sometimes gets us into trouble, as it did for Paul, writing from jail about the *sheer joy* he was experiencing just thinking about the good that Timothy was busy passing on in his absence.

Again: the point is not to reinforce class inequality and the usual presumptive arrogance that results from it. But fact is, few bosses, few CEO's, few owners of slaves or managers of persons who have bought into the dominant economic system spend much time thanking their flunkies for doing what they're told. Speaking from the boss's point of view, why should they get any special thanks just for doing their job?

Those disciple cats were looking to Jesus to give them more faith. We disciple cats nowadays tend to do likewise. And Jesus tells us that it's not a matter of having more or less at all. There is no 'more' or 'less' faith. it just is or it isn't. Faith, according to Jesus, isn't at all about size or volume. It isn't at all about how big or how much. Faith's not an item to be had at all, but a lifestyle orientation to be lived – the lifestyle of faithfulness. And because it's not a commodity, but a communal orientation we're talking about here, we must do what's required of faith without expecting regards along the way. If we expect special treatment, if we want rewards for what we do, we're not living by faith in the first place. We're only giving in order to get. But the orientation of the true faithful community is this: we hang in there because we know deep within us that God will help the oppressed and defeat the oppressor, and love will conquer all. Ultimately faith is the life we are called to as Friends of God, not as God's flunkies. And God will use our modes mustard seed faith...and make of it something that flowers, a mighty tree, food to feed scores of thousands. Let it be, Amen.