

**“A Little Faith”
Matthew 13:31-32; 17:14-20**

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Matthew 13:31-32

He put before them another parable: “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 17:14-20

When he came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, 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.”

I was in the bookstore not too long ago, and I picked up a little book, the title of which was something like *The Quotable Jesus*. I flipped through it, and on most pages, there was a saying of Jesus next to a drawing of something like a butterfly, a flower, or a beautiful landscape.

“Let not your heart be troubled.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

“Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

As I was reading through today’s passages from Matthew’s gospel, it struck me that the editors of a book like “The Quotable Jesus” might want to think twice before they add a page with Jesus’ teaching about mustard seeds. Not that the whole mustard seed image isn’t a good one. In fact, I’d imagine that the book’s copy editors and the graphic designers could put together a nice two-page spread. On one side, a simple pen and ink sketch of a mustard plant in bloom, and on the other, perhaps, the words, “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's a nice quote, isn't it? The problem is that I'm not so sure that it's true. Can we say that in church? "That was very interesting and enlightening, Jesus, but, um, I think you might be wrong." "Really, Jesus? Nothing will be impossible for me? Well, I find that awfully hard to believe."

This must have been what the folks in the crowd thought—the ones who were there listening to Jesus. They must have said to each other in the parking lot after the miracle, "I think Jesus got a little carried away this morning, don't you?" "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, nothing will be impossible for you? How insulting! I've got a bit more faith than that, and you don't see me walking on water!"

There's got to be a part of us that responds the same way. We listen to Jesus and do the math. If *faith the size of a mustard seed* should make nothing impossible and *my own faith* seems largely ineffective when it comes to moving molehills, let alone mountains, *then what does that say about this size of my faith? Is there a smaller seed available with which I might compare my meager faith?*

"Have a little faith," we might hear someone say in the face of our own troubles.

In a support group for families who had lost someone to cancer, a middle-aged man sat slumped in his chair. "When my son got sick," he said, "I had faith that he'd get well again. When he was diagnosed with cancer, I had faith that the chemo would work. When the chemo didn't work, I had faith that the radiation would do its job. When the radiation didn't do its job and the doctor said we were running out of options, I had faith that a miracle would occur. And then on the day he died, I had faith that he was in Heaven with God. But at some point since then, I've realized that my faith died a slow, painful death along with my son."

Jesus said, "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."

And here's where I want to jump into the Bible and argue with Jesus and say, "Jesus, don't say it if it isn't true! PLEASE don't say it if it isn't true! For the sake of the parent with a dying child, for the sake of the worker losing his job, for the sake of family losing their home, please don't say 'Nothing will be impossible for you' if it isn't true!"

A young woman once was asked why she left the church. "There was no scandal," she said. "No big ruckus. And it wasn't that I didn't like being there and being with the people, singing hymns, working on mission projects. I think I left because Sunday after Sunday we all came to God with our list of things we wanted God to take care of and we prayed—we prayed hard—and we had faith. And I don't know—maybe God heard us. Maybe God heard me. But I got tired of setting myself up for disappointment. So I left."

It's hard to say to that woman, or to the man who lost his son, "If you only had a little faith..."

Sometimes faith is all we have, and when it doesn't seem to be enough, where do we go from there?

Sometimes we're not entirely sure what to do with some of the things Jesus said, and so then where do we go from here?

Obviously I've been thinking about mustard seeds this week. And now that Karla and Sylvia and I are back in the Midwest, we've tried our hand at gardening again. It's been great. The Wisconsin sun is quite a bit less harsh than the sun in Texas, and we've actually been able to grow a few things up here. Zucchini, Swiss chard, radishes, lettuce and beets. So I've been thinking about seeds this spring.

A seed is an amazing thing, really. It can be so tiny. But no matter how small a seed is, there's something big inside of it. It's one thing to say that every seed has the potential to become a bush, a tree, a flower. What's really amazing, though, is to look at a giant maple tree—a huge one, towering over the street, full of lush, green leaves, strong trunk, thick sturdy limbs... What's amazing is to look at that enormous maple tree and think to yourself, "Everything I see here—the tree, the trunk, the branches, the roots, the shade, the color, the beauty, the strength—it all came from one—just one—of these little seeds.

According to Jesus, that's what the kingdom of God is like. It's like the smallest seed you can imagine—a mustard seed, maybe. And when you plant it, and you water it, and you protect it, and you tend to it, it grows; it becomes the biggest of trees.

And so what if you have faith the size of a mustard seed? I do not believe that Jesus is saying that if you have just a little faith, you can make that person well, you can keep your job intact, you can keep bad things from happening... I don't know how much evidence or experience we need to know that sometimes, our faith is beside the point. Things happen in this world, and sometimes they're awful. And anything we read in the Bible that would lead us to believe that God operates like some sort of cosmic vending machine when it comes to prayer—or to the right kind of faith—is surely misguided.

To put it more simply, having faith isn't about getting what you want.

Ok, then. What is having faith about? That's a pretty open-ended question, isn't it? "What is having faith about?" That's got to be on a top ten list somewhere of the world's most open-ended questions. Jesus could have talked all day, but instead he said, "It's like a mustard seed. And the amount of faith you have isn't really the issue. What's important is what's inside."

In Jonathan Kozol's book, *Amazing Grace*, he tells the story of a 12-year-old boy named Anthony, who lives on the street in the South Bronx, the poorest neighborhood in America. Anthony's got a hard life; nevertheless, he has found hope and sanctuary from the streets in the ministry of St. Ann's Episcopal Church.

The pastor of the church left a thriving law practice to take on the demanding ministry at St. Ann's. Likewise, several members of the church have reconfigured their lives and their work so that they can focus on the ministry in that neighborhood.

Kozol describes their work:

“Often, they rise at 5:00 a.m.

They seldom seem to finish work much before ten at night.

When people are sick, they take them to the hospital.

When their sons are arrested, someone goes with them to court.

When they are born, the church baptizes them.

They are determined to have God present in this neighborhood and for these people.

I can see why Anthony feels safe when he is here.”

What Kozol describes here is faith—not the faith of anybody getting anything they want—but rather the faith of a church to keep loving the Anthonys of the South Bronx—the faith of a church that carefully plants and cultivates seeds of new life in boys like Anthony.

Here’s another example.

In 1982, the unemployment rate in the city of Racine was 22%. Sound familiar? A number of factors contributed to the economic hardships faced here, among them the rising costs of health care. Five years of study and conversation brought together a group of concerned citizens and health care professionals, who formed the Racine County Health Care Network. And then, in September of 1987, First Presbyterian Church donated some office space and a phone line. A little over a year later, 1000 patients had been served through the Health Care Network, receiving free dental exams, checkups, and doctor visits. A year later, that number grew to 2,200 patients. A year after that, 4,500.

By 1995, the total number of patients served—the number of folks here in Racine who’d received health care services they couldn’t otherwise afford—had grown to 21,000. A woman gets a wellness check during her pregnancy. A man sees a dentist about a toothache. A child receives a prescription for his asthma. It just kept growing and growing and growing. To date the Health Care Network has served more than 100,000 patients. Of course, they don’t meet in our church anymore—they’re far too big for that. The Health Care Network has grown in size and in scope in ways that weren’t even thought possible back in 1982.

And here’s the best part. It didn’t start with a fully-functional, fully-staffed, finely-tuned free health clinic. It started with a mustard seed: just a few people, a free office, and a phone line.

What is having faith about?

Jesus said, “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.”

And here’s the thing. We have some mountains to move in Racine. Poverty. Homelessness. Violence. Such huge mountains. Racism, Classism, Unemployment. Huge!

So here’s what we’re not going to do. We’re *not* going to try and invent a mountain-moving machine! In other words, we’re *not* going to try and create a solution that’s just as big as the

problem. You know what we're going to do? We're going to plant some more seeds. We're going to have a little faith. And we're going to plant some seeds together.

And now I usually don't do this in a sermon, but I'm going to give you all an assignment. Sometime today or this week, find a seed. Chances are you've been carrying it around with you for awhile. In your head or in your heart, you've got this seed of an idea—this God-given seed of a possibility for you to plant somewhere. Find it! And think about it! And remember—THIS IS WHAT FAITH IS ALL ABOUT! Amen.