

Luke 17:5-10

Moving Mountains©

October 2, 2016

Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates

WORLD WIDE COMMUNION

How many of you are familiar with the “faith the size of a mustard seed statement?”

When I was a girl – probably around 11 or 12 – I was given a gift from my mother. It was a necklace with a tiny little seed in it. You could hardly see the seed it was so small. It came with a card that 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.”

Now, you may be wondering where, in our text today, it says that you can move mountains if you have the faith of a mustard seed. You didn’t hear it in our text from Luke, did you? No, in Luke, Jesus says, “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.”

So, I have a confession to make. I was in a hurry when I skimmed this text – actually two weeks ago. I saw the statement about faith the size of a mustard seed and decided I knew what this was about. I chose the sermon title from that initial skimming. Yes! *Moving Mountains* would be good.

Unfortunately, the moving mountains statement is from Matthew 17, not Luke 17.

The point is, we often think we know what a text says because it’s been so familiar to us for much of our lives. We hear a sentence and we think, “Oh yeah! I know that text.” Or, we take a phrase out of context and use it to suit ourselves; to prove a point; all the time not realizing it might have a different meaning.

In Matthew, Jesus had just cast out a demon and the disciples wondered why they could not do the same. Jesus is talking to them about their faith and how they can do a great deal if they rely on their faith.

But here in Luke, Jesus uses this phrase a little differently, although it is still about faith. He is teaching the disciples about what it really means to be his follower. He is talking about how we must forgive those who hurt us. If they come to us over and over and ask for forgiveness, we must forgive over and over and over, even if they keep doing the same thing again and again.

Jesus says that it is imperative that we followers do nothing that would cause another believer to stumble or fall away in the faith. All this sounds so hard and kind of intimidating.

That is why the disciples said, “Lord, increase our faith!” And that is when Jesus says, “If you had faith the size of a teeny little mustard seed you could tell that mulberry tree to move and it would uproot itself and be planted in the sea.”

It seems a little odd that Jesus goes on to talk about a slave's job being to do certain things – to prepare your meal and wait on you ... then, and only then, can he sit down and eat. Only after you've been served. And the slave would never expect you to thank him for doing what is his job.

It's hard for us to accept the image of having a slave, but that was part of the culture in Jesus' day. Jesus often teaches in words and ideas that go along with the culture he lived in.

The truth is, if we are Jesus' disciples; if we are committed to following him we might not be called slaves today, but we could be called his servants because Jesus himself became as servant for us. Think about how he got on his knees and washed the disciples' feet; how he sat with sinners; how he put himself in places where most people would never go – doing things others would never do, like touching and healing a leper; casting out demons. Sacrificing his life for the sake of all of us.

Servanthood is a good description of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We serve others because he served us. We put others first as Jesus did.

And Jesus is saying we should do it because it is expected. It is our job as his followers. It is something we do without needing or often getting any thanks for it. We are just being what we are called to be – Jesus' disciples; servants for Jesus' sake.

This is what it means for the Church to participate in the Kingdom of God; in the reign of Christ. Forgiving, serving, loving, giving our time and efforts without expectation of any extra rewards.

"Increase our faith!" We might cry with those early disciples. Who could possibly live up to this Christ-like servanthood?

But Jesus' words are filled with grace. He's not accusing us of not having faith. No. He's saying if we have faith even just the size of a mustard seed – that is sufficient for life in the Kingdom.

It doesn't take a huge amount of faith to do great things because all things are possible with God. Our faith is not something that we grow by doing good works. Our faith is, from the beginning, a gift from God. A gift of grace. A gift that we all have.

But, as we exercise that faith, we tend to realize that it is much deeper than we might have thought at first. As we go about serving others, doing the hard stuff of forgiving; loving those who might seem unlovable; making sacrifices for others – although we aren't doing it for a reward, I think we experience the reward of realizing how much faith we actually have. All of it, a gift from God.

Again, as in the past few Gospel lessons, Jesus uses hyperbole. He exaggerates what we might do with even a tiny amount of faith. Whether it be Jesus in Matthew, saying with faith the size

of a mustard seed you could move a mountain; or Jesus in Luke saying you could tell a tree to move and it would move itself – roots and all – to the water – the point is that even just a little faith gives us the grace and power to be obedient disciples of Jesus, and servants for his sake in the world.

So, what are some trees – or, sticking with the mountain metaphor – what have you witnessed, or read about where a mountain has been moved? Where something that seemed impossible actually was accomplished because of the faith of God's people? A loved one might have been healed. A person who you thought could never change, gave his life to Christ and was transformed. A prodigal daughter returned home.

An entire village in Ethiopia becomes a part of Christ's Church because Presbyterian missionaries – John and Gwen Haspels – kept being faithful servants and witnesses, loving the people, serving the people, exemplifying Christian lives.

What mountains and trees do we need to move today? What seems so big in your life that you are overwhelmed and feeling hopeless? The thing is, sometimes it doesn't look like the mountain has moved. But keep the faith, Church, because you do have faith – a gift from God – and because of that faith we can do more than we think.

Sometimes we might find ourselves in places where we don't want to be; in situations where we wonder how we got here. Perhaps that is our mountain. But even there, by being a faithful disciple, using kindness, forgiveness and prayer ... mountains might move. We might not see it, but remember, your faith is powerful.

Today is the day we celebrate World Wide Communion. I think it is amazing to consider Christians in every country of the entire world who celebrate Communion as we do. Many of them are free to openly worship and share in Communion without a worry, as we do this morning.

But we know that there are others whose lives are at risk because they are not willing to stop worshipping God, not willing to stop reading the Bible, or celebrating The Lord's Supper or baptizing believers. They have faith – some perhaps just as tiny as a mustard seed but still they eat the bread and drink the cup. And they are moving mountains inch by inch.

As we eat at the table today, imagine the great multitude of Christians gathered around the world in many places, also eating and drinking the meal that Christ our Lord gives, and thinking of us. Are they celebrating and sending us love? Are they hoping that we will think of them and perhaps do something to help them move their great mountain?

Are they refugees without a home? Are they stuck someplace in Syria where bombs are going off and children are being killed? Are they hiding as they worship?

World Wide Communion means more than just eating the meal. It means that we are in communion – bound together – with one another. We say we believe in the “communion of the saints” meaning we are all together ... those who are still here on earth and those who have finished their life on earth. We are in fellowship with all believers. We are all part of one body – the Body of Christ.

Today, as we come to the table, let us be aware of our sisters and brothers all over the world. Let us be in prayer that together we might use our faith to uproot and move trees and great mountains too.

Amen.

© Copyright 2016. All Rights Reserved.