

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

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These are a confusing series of sayings. For one, they seem to be vastly too demanding upon simple sinners. How shall we *forgive seven times a day*? How can we never cause *a little one to sin* when Christ Himself immediately states that *temptations to sin are sure to come*? And stranger, there is no forgiveness for those who cause *temptations to sin*, though those who cause it are commanded to forgive all who repent. Rather, *it would be better that a millstone be tied around their neck and be cast into the sea*.

Even stranger, how may we do all that is commanded of us as slaves of Christ, and still say *‘we are unworthy, we have only done our duty’*? For if we have done all the Lord asks, would we not yet become worthy? Yet Christ teaches that even having done everything, the master still asks for more, that we should prepare and serve at the master’s table, as though finishing all that was asked was not finishing all that was asked; it was merely a preparation for more work.

It is only natural that the Twelve Disciples ask the Lord, *‘Increase our faith,’* for to accomplish what He has commanded seems not only difficult, but perhaps even bizarre, contradictory, impossible.

But to this, the Lord does not simply impart faith to them in some kind of miracle of the heart; nor does He grant them greater understanding. Rather He confuses them more by speaking of a mulberry tree and a mustard seed.

“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Many of us have heard this saying of Christ many times, we nod piously when our friends talk about just ‘trusting Jesus’ and having ‘faith that can move mountains,’ even ‘faith the size of a mustard seed.’

But few of us ever sit back, clear our minds, silence out the world, and ask the obvious question: what the heck does that even mean?

Does faith have a size? Is it a quantity, like sugar or money? Can one get more of it or lose most of it? What does it mean to have ‘more’ or ‘greater’? Does it mean one is more devoted to good works and prayer? Yet Christ teaches that those who may seem to pray and do good may be hypocrites. Does it mean one ‘feels God’s presence more’? Yet even if it does, what does it mean to ‘feel God’s presence?’ Is it warm and comforting like a blanket? Or is it terrifying and thunderous, a crushing weight like the glory of God that dwelt upon Mount Sinai?

Does it mean that those with greater faith intellectually ‘believe’ more and ‘doubt’ less? Yet the Disciples doubt plenty, and yet are enshrined in the heavenly Jerusalem. The demons believe without any doubt *and tremble*.

It is our Lord’s good pleasure to confuse us, because every riddle is ultimately an invitation to solve it, and in solving it, to draw closer to the mind of the riddler.

‘If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed.’

How now do we solve the riddle?

For some reason, it is our immediate impulse to focus on the size of the mustard seed, its smallness. Yet have you noticed that often when we quote this verse, we say ‘if you faith the size of a mustard seed,’ but what is written is *‘if you had faith like a mustard seed.’* There is no mention of size at all. Rather the focus is the seed itself.

Then, we go on to focus on the seed, that it is so small, but grows into something so large. And yet, again, we are focusing on the size. If Our Lord wanted to talk about how seeds grow, He would have mentioned any seed. Yet He does not. He speaks specifically of a mustard seed.

Perhaps it is the mustard of the seed that is the key to cracking the riddle. What is it that makes a mustard seed distinctive? Not its size, but its flavor. And what is its flavor? It burns.

So what is *faith as a mustard seed*? It is a faith that burns. But what does that mean? Does it mean that it is particularly fervent and strong and passionate? If we think that, we are merely repeating the mistakes we made before, when we spoke of the 'size' of faith. So then, if it is not about a faith that experiences great passion, in what sense does it burn?

The secret here is hidden in the simple fact that the Lord does not speak to every simple sinner. Rather, He speaks specifically to the Twelve; those who would become the Apostles; those who would be the root of the Holy Ministry and of the Church. Those who would have tongues of fire cast over their heads on Pentecost. Those who would receive the Holy Spirit to carry on the work of God in this blighted world. Indeed, their faith shall *be increased*.

So to have faith that burns means to have faith born of the Holy Spirit, and not just any faith born of the Holy Spirit, but the faith given to the Church and her ministers to trustworthily carry out until the end of time the will of the Lord.

And what is that will?

It is to *teach the people all that I have commanded you*. And if the Church will not teach Christ's word, it shall indeed be drowned in the sea of God's wrath.

What is that will?

It is to *forgive seventy times seven times*. For if the Church does not forgive the sins of all who are repentant *she shall not be forgiven*.

What is that will?

To give bread and wine to the people saying '*take, eat, this is my body, take, drink, this is my blood.*' For even after *keeping the sheep*, the slaves of the master must return to the house and prepare a meal and serve the body of Christ, that *he may eat and drink*.

All this, the ministers of the Church do, and yet *they are unworthy, for they have only done their duty*. So they will continue to do their duty, forever, *until the sun is blotted out and the heavens rolled up like a scroll*. And why shall the Church forever do this thankless task on behalf of the master?

The reason is simple. The world is filled with sinners: if not the Church, who will absolve them?

The world is filled with heathens who know nothing about God or His Gospel: if not the Church, who will teach them?

The world is filled with those who bear the image of God, and yet are torn away from Christ: if not the Church, who will reunite them with Christ in bread and wine?

For this reason the faith of a mustard seed, the faith of fire, will indeed uproot the mulberry tree of the cross and cast it into the sea, whole and undefiled, making all waters sweet, even as at Mamra. For it is not the faith of a minister, nor of a Christian, nor of a convert, but the faith of the Holy Spirit, the very power of God unto salvation.

This is the will of God, that the tree of the cross make holy all the waters of this world, that all may by baptism be saved. The old tree must be redeemed by the new.

And let no one boast in his work or vocation, what he has done well.

Rather, let us know our place today not as sons before the Father, but as servants before a master, that we too may be made like unto Christ, who himself *took the form of a servant*. Let us know our place, and say:

'We have only done what was our duty.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

*Sermon Texts: Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; 2 Timothy
1:1-14; Luke 17:1-10.*