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At it's core, today's Gospel is about—faith and discipleship—and how they relate to one another...Faith and Discipleship.

It might be helpful to know that this passage from Luke's Gospel starts in the middle of a conversation. The disciples weren't randomly crying out "Increase our faith!" They were responding to something challenging teachings from Jesus in the preceding verses.

He had just told the disciples three things:

that there was great peril for anyone who caused others to stumble;

that believers had a responsibility:

to confront those who sin

and to offer wholehearted forgiveness to those who ask for it.

Knowing they had just been told—not to cause others to sin, to call out the sins of the community, and to forgive others for sinning, the disciples response "Increase our faith!" makes all the sense in the world. Each of these three things are hard to do. There is humility in knowing—we cannot follow Christ's example and teachings on our own, we need God's help.

"Increase our faith!" is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. It is also a humble sign that we cannot go it alone. One commentator writes, "...on the one hand, faith is a dynamic process and one can grow in faith. On the other hand,...faith is not just a matter of (one's) own strength."¹

When we are confronted with a difficult task or are experiencing doubts, the starting place is prayer—to pray for the ability to move forward in faith.

Jesus responds to their request with a parable—"if you had the faith the size of a mustard seed."

Many of you know I recently served at All Saints in Homewood. They have adopted the curriculum for children called, "The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd." It is a Montessori-based way of opening children to understanding the Bible, liturgy, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. I wish I had Catechesis of the Good Shepherd when I was a little girl, and not the desks in rows CCD of my childhood.

The place where the children gather is called the atrium and the leaders are not called teachers, but "Catechists." Like worship here at Grace—they create a sacred space to

¹ NIB, 322

honor the holy which invites participation from all of the senses. When the Bible is read, they light a candle and remind the children that the Gospel is the light of Christ.

The atrium is tactile, with altars and visual lessons. In one of those lessons, the children are invited to touch mustard seeds. These seeds are so, so, so tiny—the size of a pencil dot. And then they are shown a picture of a mustard tree. You've heard this before, but we cannot be reminded enough that Jesus' listeners would know—mustard seeds are minuscule miracles that can grow to 30 foot tall trees.

If we have the faith the size of the mustard seed, the tiniest smidgeon of faith, an infinitesimal desire for faith—Christ can work with that. We don't have to believe every word of the Nicene Creed, we do not have to have unwavering faith in every story about Jesus, we just need a smidgeon of faith—Christ can work with that.

After talking about having the faith the size of a mustard seed, Jesus takes this weird turn and tells a story which is like fingernails on the chalkboard to 21st century me. He talks about obedient slaves who eat after serving their masters.

Let's just stop here and acknowledge that passages like this were used against enslaved people for centuries—and not all that long ago. If we look at the entirety of his teachings and life, we could not conclude that Jesus was advocating for slavery. He was using the context of the world in which he was embodied, incarnate, to make an eternal point. Still, let's acknowledge it is really hard and tricky to dance around Jesus talking about slaves in this way. It just is.

Earlier I mentioned that when our faith is wavering, the first step is to pray. And I believe prayer is always a good starting point; AND Jesus' difficult parable about the slave is also a call for us to act—to do the things the tradition teaches us to do as disciples of Christ, even when our faith is wavering, and not for any recognition or glory.

We simply do them out of humility and gratitude.

Lutheran professor Greg Cary writes, "Luke's Gospel sometimes presents discipleship in terms of severe expectations. . . . A man wants to care for his father, another wants to say goodbye to his family, but the urgency of discipleship leaves no room for such common expressions of devotion. If one wants to be a disciple, Jesus suggests that one count the cost (14:25-34). The investment is great (like building a tower) and risky (like going to war). You would better consider the sacrifice; after all, "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (14:33).²

Dang! "Increase our faith!"

² Greg Carey, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-27-3/commentary-on-luke-175-10>

When I was trying to find my way back to Christianity, I decided to visit a UCC church in Chapel Hill, where I was living. The people were kind. One day I went to a Bible Study led by one of the co-pastors, Rick Edens. There were only 5 or 6 of us in that study. But the faithfulness of those fellow seekers coming back together each week, provided a sanctuary for my not very Bible-literate and deeply questioning heart.

Just a mustard seed, being watered and nurtured by the kindness of others.

A few months later, I asked to lead a class on a book that was a ballast in the storm of my marriage ending and my best friend dying. Really, I was the last person who should have been leading a class. But Rick said, “yes, we think that would be a lovely Lenten offering.”

Something in me was growing and the faithfulness of all of those people who showed up—who made sure the altar was ready for worship on Sunday; and the bulletins were printed and the announcements made; and the beautiful grounds were tended; and the Sunday School teachers welcoming the gaggle of children who loudly clamored in each Sunday. Their humble, unrecognized faithfulness that shone light on a seed in me that had been dormant.

My son Brendan decided he wanted to be confirmed at that church and every week, teachers welcomed that ADORABLE middle schooler who had a very eclectic faith upbringing. Imagine the time those teachers invested preparing lessons to water the seeds of faith of those young people.

Standing behind Brendan at the confirmation service, my hand on his shoulder as the choir sang,

““I was there to hear your morning cry,
I’ll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
to see your life unfold.”³

THAT was one of the most powerful moments of my life.

It was in the fertile soil of that community that the tiniest seed of faith in me (and in Brendan) was nurtured, and fourteen years later I would be ordained in the Episcopal Church and Brendan’s faith is prominent in the way he lives out his vocation as a hospital pharmacist.

All of those other people—disciples faithfully, unglamorously showing up and offering what they have to offer—they have no idea how they have impacted me and my family.

³ John Ylvisaker, “I was there to hear your morning cry” 1985.

That is true here today as well. If we have the faith the size of a mustard seed, Christ can work with that. If we faithfully show up to offer the gifts we have to offer—Handing out food, keeping the books, tending the gardens, teaching classes, welcoming guests, serving on vestry, God will keep growing Grace Church Woodlawn. I have no doubt of that.

Just imagine in 5 years—a vibrant children’s ministry right here at Grace again; maybe even a Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Just imagine a church full of people hungry for the Word of God fed by Christ’s love poured out through you. Just imagine beautiful gardens—a celebration of God’s good creation.

The seed is already planted. In your heart and in the hearts of those who will come.

I want to say something that feels important for me to say. When we dream these dreams together—it is from a place of gratitude and hope and understanding that the Spirit does not stand still. I want you to hear from me that you are beautiful and faith-filled just the way you are. You water the mustard seed of my own faith.

Increase our faith we pray.

And give us the fortitude to show up as disciples of Christ’s love trusting in God working in us in ways beyond our asking or understanding. Amen