

Mustard Seed Faith
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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“Mustard Seed Faith” Pilgrim Church UCC, October 2, 2016, 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time/
World Communion Sunday (Luke 17:5-10)

It's wonderful to be back with you on World Communion Sunday since spending a month in another part of the world and becoming friends with people from all around the world. It's fitting to be back, yet connected to the Holy Land and England, Australia, and New Zealand where our group members who came together at Tantur call home. And on this first Sunday back after Sabbatical, I want to share an experience. Promise to not be obnoxious and refer to “this one time in Jerusalem” all the time in sermons. But you know that I was so excited to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. As I shared before leaving, this church is venerated as the site of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. It's probably the most sacred pilgrimage site for Christians in the Holy Land, if not the most sacred pilgrimage site for Christians ever!

So there we were in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the best it can be described is holy chaos. Under a mandate from 1852 the care of the church is shared by no less than six Christian denominations—the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Coptic, Ethiopian, and Syriac Orthodox churches. It's divided into sections with a set of complicated rules that mandate how the denominations travel through each section of the church on given days. So imagine this huge church where liturgy is being read, prayers are being prayed, songs are being sung, processions are being walked simultaneously as crowds of Christian pilgrims do our best to navigate the holy chaos. People who don't dress properly with shoulders covered and longer pants or skirts are yelled at by priests and forbidden access to particular places within the church. And if you take too long to venerate at the rock of Golgotha or inside the room of the Tomb itself you will have priests yelling to move along in multiple languages, even banging on altars and other sacred objects to get the point across. My favorite became the Arabic, “Yalla! Yalla!” roughly translated as come on, hurry up!

The church isn't all about peace and quiet that's for sure! We were given some time on our own to explore and after a while I went back to this stone slab at the entrance. This stone supposedly marks the spot where Jesus' body was laid after he was crucified and before he was placed in the tomb. Our guide shared that Christians often venerate the stone in unusual ways. If someone had just bought a souvenir in the marketplace outside they will lay that souvenir on the stone to get charged up with holiness. Parents will plop their young children down for a blessing. People will be sprawled out on the stone—you get the idea. Another group member was there near me, and he was moved to tears contemplating Christ laid out on that stone.

As for me, I studied the people and how they used the stone to observe their faith. Local Christians seemed to come to that stone too. Perhaps because the entrance of the church is cool and gets you out of the stifling sun and heat for a minute. Perhaps because you can be inside the Holy Sepulchre without quite plunging into the chaos. Perhaps because you can be charged up with holiness and then move on with your day—tending your shop, playing with your children, preparing a meal for your family.

Now it would be easy to observe these practices and look down upon them. It would be easy to think it's all misguided or just a waste of time. But the look on peoples' faces during and after venerating that stone slab where Jesus' body might have been laid—the look was joy. A

joy more pure than I've seen in so long. People would leave after touching that stone or placing an object atop that stone with their faces almost glowing.

Maybe Jesus' body really was laid on that stone now resting in the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem before he was placed in the tomb. Maybe he wasn't. Does it really matter? We commemorate that event in our Christian faith in that spot. We remember. Just like when we participate in the Sacrament of Communion we remember the night that Jesus sat with his disciples and friends. We remember that they gathered together for a meal of celebration and hope.

We remember. And we can be moved, somehow filled with joy that these events weren't the end of Jesus' story or our stories. Because Resurrection awaits. No matter what, there is still hope. We can reach out and connect with Christ in our midst, and today when we celebrate Communion we connect with Christians all over the world.

Jesus' disciples once demanded of him, "Increase our faith!" And he said to them, "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." [1] Mustard seeds are only one or two millimeters in size. But mustard trees grow wild throughout the Middle East. It would be a small amount of faith indeed to be the size of a mustard seed. And yet Jesus tells us that it would be more than enough for transformation. Reminds me of Yoda saying, "Judge me by my size, do you?"

Notice Jesus doesn't just say, "Sure, your faith has now been increased!" And then all their problems get solved. He's challenging his disciples to have a little faith. To maybe allow ourselves to get charged up with holiness. What's the worst that can happen? After all, a little bit of faith goes a long way in this crazy world. A little bit of faith could even transform your life and transform the world.

One of the most liberating parts of being in Jerusalem is not being a weirdo for being religious. No one gives it a second thought if you pray or go worship because they're observing their own faith. No one stares in dismay if you put your child on that stone slab or the new cross you just bought from the shopkeeper down the road. You are not strange for outwardly observing your faith. Muslims are praying at Al-Aqsa. Jews are praying at the Western Wall and studying at Yeshiva Schools. Christians are praying on the Mount of Olives and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Everyone is observing their religion in a myriad of ways. It's so beautiful. The rest of Israel has more secular cities. But Jerusalem? Jerusalem is all about religion. Though that doesn't mean there's no suffering or conflict. Oh there will be tales to tell of the difficult moments where we raged and wept at what's happening in this Holy Land.

But having a little bit of faith helps us get through this thing we call life. Having those moments where we are charged up with holiness is what helps us face whatever it is we're facing right now. There are things we do just to live our lives. We eat and shower and go to school and drive to work and work and take care of children and grandchildren. We pay bills with money that we seem to not always have and deal with conflict and endure chemo and radiation and face challenges in our families. We rage against injustice. We both fear and hope for the future of our country in this election season. Having mustard seed faith, just a little tiny bit of faith that God is with us in the midst of what we do every day of our lives helps us go on.

It was Mary Oliver who once wrote:

"Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—

over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”[2]

In the end, faith isn't just about believing the “right” things. Faith is about trusting God. Trusting that God loves us. Trusting that God is with us and the world goes on. Trusting that we belong to the family of things as God's beloved. Faith is about that relationship with the Ground of our Being that can charge us up with holiness and sustain us through our lives. I'm glad to be back with you in our little corner of this world as we seek to have mustard seed faith together. Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] Luke 17:5-6, NRSV.

[2] Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese.”