

Sermon: The Mustard Seed
Scripture: Luke 17:1-10
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: October 3, 2010

“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed.”

This morning I feel I need to share with you what is on my heart. I’d like to ask for patience from those of you who are visiting this morning because this sermon is really more of an in-community talk than usual, specific to those of us who are regulars here, but even so, I hope there might still be some thoughts that could speak to you.

So community, one of the many gifts of sabbatical time that I was told about before I even left for mine is that often the space and time taken apart helps a pastor to see things more clearly in his/her own heart and in his/her own community, things that he would normally push aside in the inevitable day to day rush, routine, and accomplishment of tasks. And this is what has happened for me, I feel.

I have been asked since my return how it feels to be back at the church after having 3 months off and I have tried to answer honestly that it’s an adjustment but that it feels good to reconnect with people and get back into the rhythm of things. But what I haven’t shared with many people, but what I’m feeling I do need to share honestly with you now, is that my return has been a struggle. There seems to be this lack of enthusiasm or malaise within me and within our congregation that is particularly striking to me given that a sabbatical is often expected to rejuvenate and re-energize both a pastor and a congregation. I don’t know if all of you would agree with my sense of the energy in our community. I do know that some of you know exactly what I am talking about and it feels important to me to name it; this sense I have of a spirit of malaise in our midst.

It’s hard when you have a \$25,000 short-fall in this year’s budget due to unforeseen circumstances and you need to make that up while also pleading with the community to give enough to meet next year’s budget. It’s hard when we are all so busy and the church is begging for time to serve on committees. It’s hard when we make this huge and successful push last year to raise money and fix our roof and though we did the most critical work, it looks lesser than it did before we spent all that money because we had to remove the steeple. It’s hard when you feel like you need to cajole people to come

to a pie bake or a rummage sale or a prayer service, that you have to put all this energy out cheerleading the effort and the responses you do get are somewhat half-hearted. And I am certainly not standing up here to guilt anybody or say you are apathetic and you need to change, cause it's in me too as your pastor and I really believe that the lack-luster approach to things is symptomatic of something deeper. I don't believe that the way forward is to push harder, brow-beat, cajole or even, to tell you the truth, to sit down and problem solve to find some solution.

Jesus made this onerous demand upon the disciples to first confront someone who wronged them and then forgive them and if they then wronged them again then the disciples must keep on confronting them and keep on forgiving them, in fact, you must forgive them 7 times, which is like saying "just keep on forgiving". And the disciples are like – are you kidding me?! It's hard enough to forgive someone once and we are suppose to be in a continual state of forgiveness, a regular posture of forgiveness?! They were so troubled by this requirement that they said to Jesus "increase our faith, cause this just ain't happen' Jesus unless you give us more faith to accomplish it." Jesus' response was interesting. He said basically, "it's not about having less faith or more faith, it's about having faith at all. If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, he said, in other-words hardly any faith at all but at least some faith, things that you thought were impossible would become possible." And then he offers this striking and maybe somewhat ridiculous metaphor for the disciples to chew on, he says - "you could say to this tree be uprooted and plant yourself in the sea and it would happen." What you thought was beyond possible suddenly enters into the realm of the possible when God is involved.

And I think it's not happenstance that this is our scripture for this morning cause it's exactly what I need to be reminded of and I'm hoping it's what you need to hear as well. It's not about how much faith you have in God, it's not about the quantity of our faith nor is it, I would say, even about the quality of our faith, whether it's a high quality faith or a low quality faith, it's just faith that is needed, it's merely remembering that we are not on our own here, that there is actually God with whom we can interact through prayer and who interacts with us in the real tangible events and happenings of our days. We really can be in an intimate relationship with a presence greater than ourselves. I

know, it sounds a little suspect that as a church we need to state such an obvious claim but I really am thinking that these days that we do need to state it, restate, affirm it and re-affirm it. Really it's the one and only thing that distinguishes us as a church from any other organization in this town, state, country, that we are in existence in response to God. If we are not responding to God and being responsive to God and listening for God's response to us then today after this service we should just go ahead and board up the windows and doors and put this place up for sale. It would make a really cool bed and breakfast I bet.

But I want to offer an alternative to that. Right after the service is our congregational meeting to talk about taking money from our endowment to address our budget short-fall. It's a necessary thing that we must deal with in some way or another, but then I would also ask that after that meeting some of you, only if you feel moved, would stay a little longer with me so that we could pray together for our community and ask for God to bring the flow of Spirit back into our midst. And maybe we could talk also about setting up a regular prayer group to pray for the life, mission, and ministry of our church. This will not be for everyone, for sure. Some of you simply don't have time this afternoon and that's ok. Some of you feel less comfortable in a group prayer situation and that's ok. But I am hoping there are some who will feel moved to stay and pray and talk about further prayer and we can do so on behalf of the rest of our community.

To sum up: my sense is that we are in a difficult spot as a community right now. I'm telling you that I, as your pastor, am in a difficult spot right now and that what it feels like to me is a lack of enthusiasm, an absence of Spirit in our midst. I don't think the answer to this is to do more or to do less but I think the first answer is to remember that we are not in this alone but God is with us in the Spirit of Christ and that's where I know I need to turn more concertedly than I've been doing recently and I hope some of you will agree and join me.