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*St. Andrew’s Episcopal Cathedral*

*October 6, 2019 Proper 22C*

*Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Psalm 37:1-10; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10*

*If you had faith, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea’…*

There are nearly seventy different varieties of mulberry trees in the world, none of which grow underwater. They favor temperate climates, grow quickly, and are happily tolerate wind, drought, cold, and even salt. The wood of the mulberry tree is tough and hardy and resists decay. Its leaves spread broadly to provide ample shade, except where they are consumed as the exclusive food of silkworms. In many places, mulberry trees are considered invasive, until you’ve sampled its fruit.

The genus name of the mulberry is *morus*, derived from a Latin word meaning *delay* because it is the last tree to bud in the spring, when all possibility of frost has passed, and so in ancient times it was called the wisest of trees. The resulting fruit, which resembles blackberries, might be white or red or black, but is always sweet and tart and abundant. The berries are best harvested by shaking the tree, and are best eaten immediately – their juices are heavy and their skins are thin, so the fruit cannot keep very long off the tree. It is said the only way to remove mulberry stains from clothing is with scissors.

Mulberries…but, no, I’m focusing my sermon on the wrong thing, which is the problem the disciples were having as well. Anxious about their ability to do all that Jesus was asking of them, to be exemplary in generosity and love and forgiveness even – in fact, especially – when it would seem generosity and love and forgiveness aren’t warranted…anxious about their ability to do all this, the disciples beg of Jesus, “Lord, increase our faith!”

All of our readings this morning focus in some measure on faith. How much faith did the prophet Habakkuk have, and how much did he ask of God’s people, when the land God had promised them and in which they had established a comfortable life fell first to one enemy and then another?

How much faith did the psalmist have, who saw how often wickedness wins the upper hand in the world, how those without regard for keeping such commandments as loving the Lord and one’s neighbor as one’s self appear to prosper?

And how much faith did Timothy have, or Lois or Eunice or Paul or any who in the earliest Christian communities suffered for the sake of the gospel, for the good news that those the world called last and least and unlovable were first in the kingdom of God, that Jesus brought life and immortality to light for all and not just for those who believed they earned or deserved it?

*Lord, increase our faith!* But the disciples may as well have asked Jesus for mulberries. You’re focusing on the wrong thing, Jesus all but replies. *If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, and you do…*

That’s how the text reads in the gospel Greek, where the grammar isn’t as conditional as in our English translation. *If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, and you do have that…and it’s all the faith you need to help you do what you’re afraid is too hard for you, what you never imagined you could do. You could even to say to this tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you. Stop focusing on getting more faith and start focusing on using more of the faith you already have.*

What would more faith look like, anyway? How would we know we had it? Would we say the creeds with more conviction? Would we have fewer doubts? Would more of our prayers be heard? Would our hardest questions have answers? Maybe, if faith were a matter of the mind.

But Jesus speaks of faith more like a muscle, not so much guiding or directing us but moving us. Those whose faith Jesus commends are often those who have literally moved toward him to ask for healing, to give thanks, to offer service. Our faith increases when we *exercise* it; it’s not something we *accumulate*, but something we *work*. The Reverend Suzanne Guthrie writes, “When Jesus talks about faith, he isn’t talking about what you’re doing in your head; he’s talking about what you do with your hands and your feet, your wallet and your privilege, your power and your time. Faith in Jesus is not shown by saying or thinking things about him, but by following him.”

*If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, and you do, and it’s all you need to say to this mulberry tree be uprooted…*which would be impressive but wouldn’t be the most useful demonstration of how God can work through us. Jesus only means us to understand that remarkable things can happen when we use our faith, things we never imagined we could do. Habakkuk and the people of Israel would cling to their faith through years of exile in Babylon. Psalmists sing of faith that endures even when it seems God is indifferent to our suffering. Timothy’s mother and grandmother persisted in their faith long enough to pass it down to him in a time of persecution. The disciples’ faith, well, it wavered, but that we now follow Jesus Christ is because of their witness. What remarkable things could happen when we use our faith? What have we done that is as impressive as uprooting a tree and planting it in the ocean? No, that’s focusing on the wrong thing again.

The Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor remembers someone in her congregation who was unsure of faith, who worried that faith would require her to do more, to be more. But what if, she wondered, faith involved being who we already are and doing what we already do, but with one difference: namely, that we understand ourselves to be God’s people in and for the world? In fact, our faith will be strongest in extraordinary moments of test or temptation or trouble…our faith will be strongest in extraordinary moments if we exercise it in every ordinary moment we can, increasing our muscle memory of what it means to follow Jesus, what it means to practice generosity and love and forgiveness in all circumstances, when it is easy and when it is hard, if we practice it when we make dinner for friends or family, when we put a band-aid on a knee, when we water the plants, when we speak patiently with a co-worker, when we write a thank you note, when we wave at our across-the-street neighbor, when we ask the name of the homeless person at the intersection, when we shake the hand of someone we don’t know at the peace, when we call a friend who has just lost a pet, when we prayerfully fill out a pledge card, when we stop and start in traffic, when we wash the linens for the altar, when we wait in line with strangers at the fair… When we get our focus right, fixed on the the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus, our mustard seed faith may not literally uproot trees, but the metaphorical forest on the ocean floor is vast, each mulberry tree an ordinary act of kindness, courage, hospitality, mercy, forgiveness, welcome, love; a prayer, an apology, a casserole, a kiss, a bedside visit, a bag of groceries.

If we had faith the size of a mustard seed, and we do, and it is enough…If we had faith the size of a mustard seed, and we do…what remarkable things might we do? What mulberries might we uproot?

In the words of St. Paul, *Glory to God, whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Amen.*