

Wesley United Methodist Church  
October 2, 2016 – World Communion Sunday  
Text: 2 Timothy 1:1-14  
Luke 17:5-10  
Title: Keep on Obeying

Today's Gospel is one that, quite frankly, I have had difficulty with at various times. When I was in college I was involved with a group of committed Christians whose theology was more literal than what I had experienced in my life. Passages like today's Gospel were used to prove, at least in my mind, that I did not have enough faith. I couldn't see that anything I did was as dramatic as what is described in the Gospel.

Now, I don't think I ever really expected that I could say to a tree, "Move from here to there" and it would happen, but still the group with whom I was involved told great stories of things they had prayed for and that happened just the way they prayed. I wanted that faith. To be honest, maybe what I wanted was that kind of power?

Stop and think about it for a minute. If this were literally true, if anything we wanted could happen just because we prayed then as students we could have all had straight A's or maybe even avoided exams all together. As Adults we could have had our dream jobs or maybe so much money that we wouldn't have to work. We could have all had perfect health, the absolute perfect partner, perfect children, and perfect lives. I daresay, it probably hasn't happened exactly that way for any of us.

I suspect that is because that kind of faith would be simply manipulation and while we might use it for some good things, the temptation would be to use it for ourselves and to show how much faith we had. I can understand the apostles' plea to Jesus, "Increase our faith!" It is one that I have prayed many many times through the years.

I used to hear Jesus' response as a rebuke. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could . . . ." A mustard seed is tiny – one of the smallest seeds known. The tree that Jesus says you could move, the mulberry tree is exactly the opposite. While it may not be the largest tree – it is known for its size and especially for the depth and strength of its root system. Its roots are so extensive that the Mishnah, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century collection of authoritative rabbinical teachings prohibited its planting within 50 cubits (about 75 feet) of a cistern.<sup>i</sup> Moving a mulberry tree under any circumstances would be a pretty remarkable feat.

I remember reading somewhere that the Greek here, that says, "If you had faith" is a particular tense that means, "If you had faith, and you do". In that case, Jesus is really telling the apostles that in fact, they already have enough faith to do whatever is required of them. Faith is a gift from God, not something to be compared with others, or admired, or stowed away but to be lived out. Faith is a gift that sustains the life of the disciple as a life of service to God – and it is service, because Jesus came among us as one who serves.

This is why he can use the next imagery of a slave – another uncomfortable image for us, but one that Jesus' hearers would understand – a slave or servant simply doing his job; simply doing what is expected.

The faith we have been given is enough to do whatever is required of us. So, the question is not how much faith do we have, but what do we do with the faith that we have? What do we do with the faith we have been given? The faith we have been given certainly has a component that is for ourselves. It is a faith that can provide peace and comfort in the midst of difficulty, strength in the midst of weakness, hope in the midst of hopelessness. But this faith is not only for ourselves – in fact, it is primarily

not for ourselves. The faith we have been given is faith that moves us outside of ourselves into a world where God is already present calling to us and partnering with us. This can be very liberating, because it is not about how much faith we have and how many great things we can do with that faith, but how we can partner with God and live according to God's commandments.

This week many of us received an email from Linda Leach, and I have her permission to share with you what I am about to say. She reminded us that it is now one month since Jerry's surgery and stroke. Their lives have been changed drastically as lives sometimes are in the matter of a heartbeat. One of the things that has been consistent though is their faith. I am not going to say that they have never had questions, or times of discouragement. Quite frankly I would be surprised if they haven't but through it all they have clung to a faith that sustains them knowing that they are not in this alone and that God is present with them every step of the way.

Linda's email talked about the physical therapist asking Jerry to sing knowing that this is something that is very important to him. Jerry could have picked any song to sing, but he sang, "Amazing Grace". Now, I'm sure that the therapist and medical people were doing some assessment during that time but something else was happening as well. Linda wrote, "He started singing and everyone in the room stopped and turned around to see who was singing. The nurse had just come in to give him some medication and she heard someone singing and when she saw it was Jerry she started to cry. God is good."

To me, that is faith in action. That is God using circumstances that are not what we would have chosen to continue to witness and to work in

the lives and hearts of others – in this case through the faithful singing of a man of faith who is himself praying and working to try to do simple things that he and all of us once took for granted.

If we go back to Jesus' words to the apostles, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could ..." I believe that Jesus is saying that what looks completely impossible, becomes possible if it is approached with faith. William Barclay in his commentary on this passage challenges us to think about "scientific marvels, surgical operations, feats of endurance achieved – which not so very long ago would have been regarded as utterly impossible." I think about just a few of the many changes that I have seen in my own life – from a four party telephone line to cell phones that are really computers and indeed, have the name smart phones because of all they can do, the Internet, the medical advances, our first African American president, the first woman running for president on a national ticket – these are all things that were beyond my imagination as a kid – and yet they are all realities today. In my mind, these are examples of mulberry trees being uprooted and moved.

It seems that if we approach a thing saying, "it can't be done" then we will be right, it will not. If we approach something saying, "It must be done" chances are that someone will figure out how to do it. It is important for us to remember that we do not ever need to approach a task alone trusting in our own power and strength, but that we have the amazing gift of approaching whatever needs to be done in faith, knowing that God is with us and God's power is sufficient to accomplish what we cannot do on our own.

A couple of weeks ago, I shared with you part of the story of a young girl Safiatu, living in Sierra Leone and needing heart surgery. I shared with

you how a 12-year-old girl Sammy, with the faith and convictions of a child, motivated the more jaded, or we would have said realistic, adults in the church where I was serving so that the impossible became possible. None of us had any idea what could or would happen but with faith that looked outward, we were called into a situation where God was already present and working and not only was Safiatu's life saved but she continues to affect and change lives every day. Another mulberry tree being uprooted and planted in the sea.

On this World Communion Sunday, we are vividly reminded that we are connected with people all over the world, people of faith. Together we are part of a great crowd of witnesses, of people moving mulberry trees by partnering with God and with each other in faith to make what looks completely impossible become possible. We do this not to bring glory to ourselves, not so that we can boast about how much faith we have, but because God's great love for us in Jesus Christ calls us to respond with love and service in the places where God is already present and calling us.

One of the commentators I read used a wonderful phrase here to describe the faith we have been given and that I pray we are living, "A tiny faith that aspires to great things, but that knows how to kneel and serve."<sup>ii</sup>

That is the kind of faith that God has given us and that we are called to live and then get out of the way and watch the mulberry trees that are moved when we keep obeying God.

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<sup>i</sup> Keeping Holy Time Year C, p.325

<sup>ii</sup> Feasting on the Word,