

October 6, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Morar Murray-Hayes



**Reading:** Luke 17.5-10

**The Message:** Pin Oaks and Chestnuts: Mustard Seeds and Mulberry Trees.

Neighbours near our place on Hay Bay were visiting last week. After church we made a pilgrimage to the Arboretum at the Royal Botanical Garden to gather seeds of native trees like pin oaks and tulip trees, chesnuts and maples. Michael planted them this week in an area one might call a nursery: carefully protected from wind and deer, rabbits and mice. He will tend and nurture them as he has done so many others until they are strong enough to be planted on his property to strengthen the dna of the trees he has already planted.

His goal is to create a rich diversity of native plants, and within each species, a rich diversity in tree dna.

This requires research and travel, and occasionally a disdainful look when we suggest a nice lilac hedge.

Michael has been doing this for years. But he is reaching the age when he won't see these seedlings grow to mature oaks and maples, just as those who planted trees on our property never got to enjoy the row of white pine lining the drive -- or got to cut down those darn dead lombard poplars or Manitoba maples that grow twenty feet a year because they aren't in Manitoba!

Michael is living a quiet life of faith in Mother Earth as he scuffs up chestnuts and acorns with his feet, reaches down and carefully separates his prizes into pockets and bags. He has studied creation and lives obedient to the principles he has learned. He is not swayed by beautiful lilac blooms, even though they were brought to this country by pioneers. No, they weren't a part of the plan for this ecosystem. He is loyal to the plan.

It's a humble plan that he is obedient to and he has faith in his role in the plan.

This difficult little passage from Luke this morning is more understandable to me when I think of Michael as I hear the question the disciples ask.

"Can you give us more faith?"

What is this faith they seek, yearn for even? Faith means trust or confidence in someone or something. The disciples are asking for a closer bond with Jesus, to trust in him more. It's not about faith in a certain doctrine or teaching, it's about loyalty to this friend and teacher.

"Can you give us more faith?" And in response, Jesus says:

If you had trust in me the size of a mustard seed, you could ...

This is disturbing, isn't it? If we had more faith we could perform miracles: cure cancer, eradicate poverty, find a parking space when we needed it.

Some brag of being able to perform miracles, and in the echo of their claims, we are ashamed that our faith can't do the same.

But is this what Jesus is promising?

This passage is tucked between a warning not to put stumbling blocks in the way of the faith of others and the rest of this reading about **slaves**. These are harsh messages Luke has piled up. Jesus is pushing the envelope: exaggerating for effect: even being sarcastic.

After all, it's rather ridiculous to throw mulberry trees into the ocean or move mountains. When Jesus' followers ask for faith, what do we want? Certainty? perhaps even superiority? Faith, then, becomes an accomplishment. Like a drug you take that takes away all pain or that makes life easy..

With enough faith, the televangelists tell us, we can conquer doubt, illness, and become rich in the process. Our troubles will be over if we just get Jesus to give us a big enough faith..

But that gets Jesus angry. Maybe the point is that faith doesn't come in sizes. It's a question like that other one Jesus dislikes, "Who gets to sit closest to you in heaven?"

And Jesus' response is -- faith is a gift. Don't examine it like you can exchange it for a bigger size. "You have it! It's what you do with it that counts!"

We know from the whole of Jesus' life and teachings, from his death and resurrection, that he isn't about casting mulberry trees into oceans.

Rather, we do know that Jesus is about bringing into reality here on earth God's plan.

And the second part of the reading is about what he expects from the disciples if they truly accept God's gift of faith and how it fits into God's plan.

It's difficult to see anything good about a reference to slaves, and some translations change this to servants. But Jesus seems to want to link his frustration with the disciples with the harshness of the concept of slavery.

He puts the disciples in the position of God: should God thank you for your faithfulness? Should God see how loyal you are and say, "You're wonderful!?" Should Jesus say, "Thanks for trusting us?" or rather, should we be focussing on obedience to God's plan? On gratitude for the gift of a relationship with this Jesus, and for the opportunity to participate in God's good work, God's plan?

Thank God for the Gift of Faith and be obedient to God's will: that's the message of this scripture.

But we hear these words on the day when we are invited, along with millions of others, to gather at God's table; to remember a generous God who feeds us physically and spiritually. How can we be anything but grateful?!

Someone once said that faith is not so much an idea or belief, it's more like a muscle. We have been given this muscle -- and we know what muscles are for -- to be used.

With the way things are in the world, it can be refreshing to practise a little humility before God who offers us the gift of faith, gratitude for the fortitude, the resilience faith gives us.

And that gratitude can take the form of setting our sights on the little bit of God's plan we can live out -- it's God's plan we are called to obey, to serve.

On this day, we come to the table remembering what God offered us through Jesus, wise teacher, prophet, encourager and chastiser, but also people all over the world who gather at table to do the same.

Unfortunately, our culture has acquired a taste for spectacular spirituality.

By the grace of God, mustard seed faith -- A humble faith like my friend Michael's that scuffs up seeds, plants and nurtures them without thought of reaping rewards -- a mustard seed faith suffices.

And our little faith is enough because God is at work beside us toiling with us through the day and inviting us to join with others at God's table.

Hear 'The Surprise at the Table'  
A Poem For World Wide Communion 2019  
by Andrew King

Underneath your nails: the dry brown earth,  
and on your sweat-streaked brow.  
The work in the fields was hard today,  
the soil resisting the plow.

Your muscles ache as you approach the house,  
thinking of food, a drink for your thirst.  
In your weary hunger you long to dine,  
but a slave does not eat first.

And the slave expects no thanks or praise  
for doing only what must be done.  
The master is served before the slave:  
the slave's the unworthy one.

But what is this? . . . From the dining table  
the aroma of fresh baked bread.  
And is that not the master himself  
bidding you take his seat at the head?

Can those be the master's hands, like yours,  
still showing the stain of soil?  
Was that the master next to you in the fields?  
His sweat joining yours in toil?

Behold him pouring, now giving you the cup:  
a drink of his finest wine.  
Hear him say: I do this of my love for you.  
For all hungry ones, and for all time.