



Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
2 October 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Jesus said to his disciples, "Occasions for sin are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck, and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to sin. Be on your guard! If a brother or sister sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive." The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "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."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

A letter arrived in the church office this week from a woman who attends worship here with her grandchildren. "I just wanted to say thank you for the wonderful worship on your 'Welcome Home Sunday' on September 18<sup>th</sup>. It always brings me joy to worship with your church. You share joy and challenge us to do something with our faith. I am always glad to visit and look forward to one day moving close enough to be near family and join your church." Not a bad way to start out your week. It always feels good to be reminded of what you already know and believe about the community of faith you serve. A place of life. A place of joy. A place of welcome. A place of invitation – where you are inspired to be more of who God wants you to be in the world.

"Increase our faith!" The disciples tell Jesus. It is an honest request. A request I have heard too many times to count among members of the churches I have served. A request I have made on more than one occasion in my own prayers. In the wilderness of decision; at the end of a loved one's life; when the world seems to be falling apart around you: Lord, increase my faith! You might know these words spoken in a different way: "God, give me a sign."

After all the disciples just heard Jesus teach them that if someone sins against you seven times a day and turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent," you must forgive. If ever, we needed Jesus to increase our faith – it would be in response to someone betraying us seven times in the same way and returning to us seven times telling us, "I repent." Now I do not know about you, but after the 2<sup>nd</sup> time – my forgiveness dries up very fast. And I am supposed to let this yahoo off the hook seven times?

Well at this point, I do not need Jesus to simply increase my faith. I need much more than a little increase in my faith meter. After someone committing the same sin against me seven times in one day – well I need this story of Jesus from Mark, chapter 9. "Bring the boy to me. So, they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the



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boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. "It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.

The good news is that forgiveness is the easy part. Say what!? Absolutely. The bad news is that belief is even harder. Just look around the room. Look around the neighborhood. The places you work, play, rest. This is where we find the difficulty of belief most apparent.

It is the reason that sometimes I find the words of Jesus today particularly hard to handle. "The Lord replied, "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." Jesus, sometimes I think the hope you want to offer turns out to be the despair many already expect. Mustard seeds are nothing. The size of a pinhead. And I apparently have less faith than this. Because I had faith in size even equal to a mustard seed, I would be able to tell a tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea. Jesus, this is a struggle. I wonder if Jesus believed that teaching us about mustard seed sized faith would inspire us to a greater confidence in our belief. And somehow the words of the father of his demon-possessed son come back to haunt me: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

Belief is hard! Faith is hard. It is hard because we are people who believe in Jesus and still know the pain and suffering of this life. It is hard because we are a people who believe that the smallest mustard seed size moments of our lives, when offered with faith, do not often mean a lot in the greatness of what God can do. What we so often forget is that faith is found not in the mighty acts of heaven but in the ordinary and everyday acts of doing what needs to be done, responding to the needs around us, and caring for the people who come our way.

The question is: do we know this? Do we believe this? That Jesus would call so many of the unnoticed things they do each week faithful? Showing up for work and doing a good job. Listening when someone needs to talk. Getting the kids off to school. Sitting with someone in the cafeteria who looks like they could use a friend. Volunteering at a local homeless shelter. Making coffee. Baking bread. Voting even if the field of candidates seems discouraging. Balancing the books for your business or community group. Writing a thank you note to someone who has done a kindness. Cooking supper. Praying for a neighbor who is having a hard time. And that's the point. None of these is any big deal, and yet it is just these kinds of acts that occupy so much of our lives. And I suspect it wouldn't cross the minds of most of our people that they are acts of faith. Mustard seed size acts of faith that grow far beyond the size



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of the seed that planted those moments of faith. I wonder about those who have been a part of the church and walked away. Did they leave for some deep sadness or hunger that was never met by the church they attended? Did they leave because they no longer found themselves believing in God? Or did they leave because they thought their small acts of faith did not amount to enough for God to take notice? When the truth is God had been paying attention all along.

Yesterday on the radio I listened to a man tell the story of listening to a podcast where he realized he had missed out on who God wanted him to be in the world. Meaning...he started out in childhood going to church but not ever feeling like God cared about him or loved him. He left the church at a young age. In his thirties he was commuting to work one day when he listened to a podcast from a pastor sharing the story of a God who loves, who brings peace, and who wants us to share that love and peace in the world. The man sharing the story said, "at that moment, he realized if he could be more loving, more peaceful, more trusting of this God – the world just might be a better place. Dear friends, that sounds like mustard seed size faith to me and maybe that is all God has been asking us to do all along. Amen.