

**Pastor Madelynne Lindsey**  
**October 6, 2019**

WE ARE WORTHLESS SLAVES LUKE 17:5-10

Let us pray: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you my Lord and redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a story told of a small town in the USA in which there were no nightclubs. Eventually, however, a nightclub was built on the street. One of the churches, in the area, was so disturbed that they conducted several all-night prayer meetings and asked the Lord to burn down the nightclub.

One night, lightning struck the nightclub and it was destroyed by fire. The owner, knowing how the Christians had prayed, sued the church for the damages. His attorney claimed that their prayers had caused the lightning and fire.

The church people, on the other hand, hired a lawyer and contested the charges. During the trial the judge declared, "It's the opinion of this court that the owner of the nightclub is the one who really believes in prayer while the church members do not!"

You see the nightclub owner really believed his club was struck by lightning as a result of the Christian prayers. Whereas the Christians filed a lawsuit essentially disputing what they asked in their prayers to God.

Here is a situation where people who don't have faith will find God to be faithful! And yet, those who claim to have faith really don't. Further proof that God truly hears prayers and that our Lord loves to deal with impossible situations and make them possible?

The story we find in the lectionary today is one of those stories that will sort of throw you for a loop because it's one of those stories in which Jesus gets a little testy. And it's not with the Pharisees, not with the rich or the powerful, but with his friends—the disciples.

The story begins with the disciples approaching Jesus with a seemingly reasonable request: "Lord! Increase our faith!" Jesus in our Gospel reading today challenges us when he said:

"If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Pull yourself up by the roots and plant yourself in the sea,' and it will obey you. The plant which Jesus referred to as the mustard seed could yield a large shrub.

What Jesus is saying is "a little faith can go a long way". Let's look at the verse in its context. The disciples had asked Jesus to increase their faith and Jesus doesn't appear to answer the question - or does he?

I think he does. You see - any faith is good enough to release God's power. It is not the QUANTITY of your faith that matters just the QUALITY, however small. Jesus says it doesn't take much faith to do great things.

The tiniest amount of faith can plant a tree in the ocean or move a mountain from one place to another. Jesus says, "It doesn't take much faith to do what you need to do." In other words, "You have plenty right now. You have enough faith. It doesn't take much. God has already given you all the faith you need.

Have you ever noticed how Jesus often manages to avoid answering questions that are put to him, by answering a different question altogether? I am sure that annoyed His disciples. They didn't want to have search their minds for the answer.

Wouldn't it be great, in those days if there was an instruction manual right there in front of them? But instead of answering their question, Jesus goes off on some tangent that doesn't even seem related to the current topic of discussion!

This passage is just one more example of Jesus telling the disciples they are asking the wrong question. Instead of asking for more faith, or bigger faith, the disciples should have been finding opportunities to act on the faith they already had.

To show the disciples how they'd gotten it backwards, Jesus tells a parable. I really think that what Jesus is telling the disciples is this — "You have enough faith to be faithful. "

In other words, he is saying, "You don't even need a mustard seed size faith. The little bit of faith you have is enough for you to do what I've called you to do."

Why do I think that? Because of what Jesus says after the mustard seed story. He gives an example of a servant, a story that seems to have nothing to do with faith, or with the question the disciples just asked.

Slavery was an institution that was taken for granted, and it apparently crossed common boundaries between social and economic classes. But the distinction between slavery and freedom remained clear. As a slave, you were bound to obey the authority of your master.

So, Jesus turns from an example of faith to an example of faithfulness to illustrate his point. Probably Jesus and the disciples are outdoors, walking along. Jesus has already pointed to a mustard plant, and a mulberry tree.

Now he points to a servant plowing a field, and another looking after sheep. Both were very common practices in that day, and visual examples were easy to spot.

And to the master, Jesus says, "Would you tell your slave to eat first, before serving you? Of course not. Wouldn't you be more likely to say, 'Serve my dinner, and then you can go eat yours?' And do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded?

Then Jesus does something between verses nine and ten that we might miss if we aren't careful. Up to this point in the story, Jesus has had his listeners identifying with the master of the house. Suddenly, he changes the viewpoint of his listeners to that of the slave.

Jesus says to the slaves, "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

In other words, being faithful and obedient to God doesn't make God owe us anything. It's what we are supposed to do. We need to be more faithful, serving with no expectation of praise or recognition, in true humility.

I read somewhere that when men help around the house, they expect some kind of recognition. So, when they're finished vacuuming, or folding the clothes, or with some other chore, men want their wives to see what they've done and give them some reward.

Men would say, "Honey, did you see how great the carpet looks after I vacuumed it?" Or, "Just look at those windows, I did a great job cleaning them, don't you think?" Us women would just go about our business doing stuff for which we do not expect, or receive, recognition.

That's what Jesus is saying here. Even if you've done a great job of serving God, of not leading others to sin, of forgiving others when they do go down the wrong path, you've only done what you were supposed to.

Our obedience is by no means a way to gain honor, and good works aren't something we do in order to receive a reward. We obey and serve because Christ calls us to follow him in obedient service. He gives us plenty of faith to do this, but it's up to us to be faithful followers.

In order to become true and faithful disciples, we must live out our faith in community. Faith depends on this idea of community, because, when you get right down to it, faith is bigger than believing. Faith is trust, and trust requires relationship.

As we put our trust in Jesus, we give up any illusions of depending on ourselves only, and we recognize that faith cannot be measured; it can only be lived.

We don't need more faith; we need to be faithful. And it's also possible that we need a different kind of faith. Maybe what we need is the kind of faith that, like mustard seed, spreads contagiously wherever it is dropped, grows persistently, and cannot be easily destroyed.

Maybe what we need is the kind of faith that is willing to enter the process of Christian character formation with humility, spiritual discipline, and patient trust. When we understand that faith is trusting God, we can begin to live out that trust through discipline and humility, becoming true servants of God who do the work God gives us to do.

What work is God giving us? How can we be faithful servants who trust our Master? We can promise to uphold one another through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.

We can promise to pray for one another, and with one another. The Tuesday evening worship is solely for that purpose, to pray with one another.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if some of us decided to meet regularly to pray with each other for the needs of this congregation, this town, and Christ's ministry among us?

There's a popular quote that floats around the internet. "Ninety per cent of success is showing up." The point is simple. You must be present to participate in the full life of the Body of Christ.

It isn't something you can do via e-mail or text. It isn't something you can pencil into your calendar, and erase when other events crowd into your time. Your presence among the people of God is not only important for you, it's important for the rest of us.

We promise our gifts. Not only our tithes and offerings, but our spiritual gifts to help build up the Body of Christ. We have each been given a variety of gifts and using them is part of our discipleship. It's how we follow Jesus.

We promise our service. Not to be thanked, not to be recognized, not to receive honor, but because God calls us to serve. And we promise our witness.

This promise was added to remind us that we are called to be witnesses to God's work among us in the person of Jesus Christ, and his continued work among us through the power of the Holy Spirit. No one is asking you to stand on the street corner and preach.

But as followers of Jesus, we are called to tell others the good news that God loves us so much he sent his own Son, that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. Trust God. Be faithful. Have a contagious kind of faith that can't help but share the good news. This is discipleship.

Are we worthless slave? Let's face the real problem, folks. We lack having real faith. Don't we? Sometimes we have more faith -

- In our car starting than we have in God answering our prayer.
- More faith in our best friend helping us out than we do in Jesus making the difference for us.
- More faith in getting a weekly paycheck to pay our bills than we do in paying our tithes.
- More faith in our doctor diagnosing and treating our illness than we do in God that created us and gives us our every breath.

Don't take any of this as condemnation. Just face the cold hard facts. We need GOD to INCREASE OUR FAITH! But our faith needs to be increased so that whenever we come to a crisis, in our life, we will be ready for it.

But that's not easy, is it? Why is faith so difficult for us to have sometimes? One reason is because we are always losing faith in people. For example: Someone will promise to meet us somewhere and they don't show up. No phone calls. No explanation. No apology.

Our response is, "Well I'll never have faith in what they say ever again..." But we can always have faith in Jesus. He said, I'll never leave you nor forsake you!"

Right about now someone may be thinking to themselves, "Hmm, I need to start working on this if I only had a little more faith. No, beloved, that's not how it works.

You can't have a little faith, and you can't muster it up on your own. Faith (rightfully) belongs to God. You can only get His faith from Him. God is calling us to be faithful, to trust him, to do the work he has given us, as obedient servants.

God is calling us to promise our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness as we live out our faith together in this community we call 'church.'

As we do that, we may discover that our faith does, indeed, grow not because of anything we do, but because of the One we trust and obey. Together we can keep Watchung Avenue our home.

All it takes is a little mustard seed of faith. Don't be worthless slaves, step up and say Here I am Lord, take me. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, Holy Christ, don't give us more faith. But through the power of Your Spirit, teach us to use the faith that You have already given us. Call us to things that are hard, and that are true, knowing that a life of service to You is its own reward. Amen.