

“A Tiny Bit of Faith”

Luke 17:5-6

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For most of my life I have believed that one day, if I worked hard enough, I would achieve a perfect life balance. I earnestly thought there would come a point when I would reach the maximum maturity and wisdom needed to succeed. I would feel strongly connected in all my relationships and with each of my family members. I would know the ins and outs of my job and would finish everything early, never feeling overwhelmed, rushed, or behind. I would work out for 30 minutes every day, cook healthy meals each night, and still have plenty of time to unwind at the end of the day.

Growing up and in my first years after grad school I kept working towards this mythical life balance, convinced that other adults had achieved it and I just had to work harder. In my desire to find this balance, I enlisted a therapist to help me. It was the best investment I've ever made. It took several months but I eventually confessed this desire to my therapist and told her that I was afraid there was something deeply wrong with me because although I had fleeting moments of balance, it never lasted.

My therapist, who was normally very reserved and quiet, laughed. She laughed a deep, belly-laugh that seemed to go on forever, because she thought I was joking. When she realized I wasn't, her face dropped and she said, “You are working for the impossible. There are too many changing factors and things out of your control to always have a perfectly balanced life. I don't know anyone who has ever achieved that!” Hearing her say this was like having a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. Ever since then I have been un-learning my previous belief, and learning

how to embrace life as it is, instead of life how I believe it should be.

Behind my belief was a very real fear that I was not good enough or working hard enough. It is the same fear that I think the disciples felt when they demanded that Jesus increase their faith. Jesus had asked them to do a lot and they were scared they weren't going to be able to live up to his expectations. He told them to leave behind their families. He told them it was their responsibility to carry on his ministry and his work after he was gone. He told them it could only be them, that they were his chosen leaders. And that terrified them.

The disciples thought in order to do this that Jesus needed to do *more* than teach them the right words or give them directions about where to travel and which houses to visit. The disciples thought Jesus needed to make them the most faithful and the most committed disciples ever. They thought that they needed to be the very best at their jobs, or else they would fail. It felt like a lot of pressure. And so, when they couldn't take the stress anymore, they said, 'We can't do this! We are frauds! We don't have all the right answers! Lord, you have to increase our faith!'

Luckily for the disciples, and really for all of us, Jesus told the disciples to take a chill pill because they had misunderstood him. Jesus was not looking for perfection, and he knew from the day he met them that the disciples were not perfect. He didn't need them to transform into something they weren't – he was more interested in who they already were and the little and big things they were already doing every single day. He said to them, all you need is the faith of a mustard seed. In other words, 'If you have just a tiny bit of faith, you'll be okay. With that tiny bit of faith, you are already doing great things.' I can almost hear the disciples sighing with relief. Jesus's permission for them to continue to be their imperfect, doubting, sometimes-getting-everything-wrong, selves was exactly what they needed to hear.

Too often we are terrified that we are not going to be able to do what is asked of us, that we are not good enough or talented enough or prepared enough. Or worse, we become

paralyzed by waiting until the day we become those things and will step out as a new person, full of all the qualities we are secretly afraid we lack. We hide out from the world, waiting until we are someone who is better, stronger, smarter, thinner, kinder, richer, more successful.

Too often we compare ourselves to people around us and we find ourselves lacking – we start to worry that everyone else has it figured out and one day they will realize we are frauds. We become scared that our partners, our children, our friends, and our coworkers will find out we have been pretending all along and that we are not as actually as good or put together as they think we are. So we wait and we cling to this notion that if we can just change everything about ourselves, life will be easier and everything will work out, whatever everything is and whatever needs working out. Today's scripture passage is our reminder that Jesus says to each of us, “I hear you, and you are enough. Even if your faith is as small as a mustard seed, you are enough. Even if YOU feel as small as a mustard seed, you are enough.”

If we all waited to start living or working until we were sure we had all the answers and were the best possible person for the job, nothing would ever get done! Do you know what I mean? Have you ever had a project that you couldn't even start because you don't feel qualified to do it yet? Or that one thing you've been working on – sewing a quilt for a friend, a book or an academic paper, and the weight of it, the meaning of the gift or the importance of the message you want to communicate with your words, is so important that you can't start it. Or, maybe you have started, but you seem unable to finish it. So it stays hidden, tucked away in your mind or in a drawer somewhere, and you keep waiting until you have enough faith in yourself to finish it.

I have experienced this fear myself working with the the Racial Justice Task Force. We have this incredibly smart, committed, passionate, justice-seeking group of people, and we really want to do our congregation right by leading us to conversations, educations, and advocacy around Racial Justice. We can feel the weight and importance of our work, and we want to get it

right. But as a group we've named that we are learning as we go. That we don't have all the answers. That we haven't solved racism and are simply presenting the solution to everyone else. We know that in doing this work we are bound to make mistakes that we can't even anticipate.

And yet, we have been charged to keep doing this work. To lead the congregation, and to keep leading even if we make mistakes or stumble along the way. Otherwise, we would get nowhere, and nothing would change. Racial Justice and being a church working towards anti-racism would just be words on a paper or a nice idea we had one time. Nothing would change, not in our relationships, not in our greater Lansing community, and certainly not in our world. We would save ourselves the risk of being vulnerable by leading through our imperfections, but our charge would remain incomplete.

What Jesus is trying to tell his disciples is that they are ready to live out their faith and their work, right now, just the way they are. Just the way we are. Not five pounds lighter or five years younger or older. Not with an official extra three letters following your name, or when you've aced the master class. Even if your faith, meaning your trust, confidence, and commitment, is the size of mustard seed, you are ready to get to work with the business of changing the world.

We are often so busy criticizing ourselves or hiding out in fear that we discredit the important work of discipleship that we already do. Think about what would happen to our young people if their teachers stopped showing up each day in the classroom because they didn't believe their lesson plans were good enough. What would happen if nurses stopped caring for their patients, hairdressers stopped cutting hair, farmers stopped growing crops, and plumbers stopped plumbing – all because they were afraid they weren't the best in their field. *We are not asked to be the best, we are asked to do the best with what we have.*

As a church, we talk a lot about the things we want to do, we hope to do, and we dream of

doing. This comes from the desire to do the best with what we have, and we are able to have these conversations and speak these dreams because we keep keep them parallel to what is already happening and what we do week after week as a community. We are able to dream because so many people show up and go about the work of being church together. We don't wait until we are the biggest church, or the coolest church, or the most on time church. We are mustard seed people! We are living out our faith right now. With whatever we have. Because we know that when you put a whole bunch of mustard seeds together we can grow into something that is as strong as a mulberry tree. We know that when we are working together, eventually we can accomplish something as wild and impossible as a tree growing in the sea. We know that in order for the impossible to become possible, we have to start with what we have, and use the resources and the gifts and skills that we have been given.

What I've discovered in my own life is the nagging doubt that I am not enough might never fully go away. The best I've learned to do is quiet the doubts and the fears, to move past them so that they don't control my life or cause me to become paralyzed. When I am tempted to pray to God to make me more capable or stronger or more faithful, I instead thank God for mustard seeds. All around me is evidence that God does a whole lot with mustard seed faith. So, as long as I can muster - or mustard - up a tiny bit of faith in myself, in my church, or in God, then I am enough. God made each one of us and loves love us just as we are, and that is enough.