

2019 LWML Sunday

Sermon

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“Moving Mulberry Trees”

Text: Luke 17:6

And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (Luke 17:6).

We hear a lot of talk these days about how difficult it is to be a Christian. The world has changed. The nation has changed. Increasingly, people are walking away from the church or choosing never to affiliate because we are seen as irrelevant, judgmental, or hypocritical. The more secularized we become as a nation, we’re told, the less impact we Christians seem to have.

All this talk about the challenges of living in “a post-Christian world” can lead to timid, fearful, even doubtful disciples of Jesus Christ. Truthfully, our world is not that different from the world of Jesus’ first disciples. Their world has been described as a pre-Christian world in which people did not know Jesus or His teachings or His mission.

That phrase “pre-Christian” may be a better description for our world today, better than “post-Christian.” It says that Christians are not participants in a dying institution but a movement. It says that people are watching us, wondering what makes us tick. To call our world “pre-Christian” is to say we can still have an impact by the way we live. It says that our stories and songs matter and that our everyday life means everything to the way the world sees Jesus Christ.

This is exactly what was happening with Jesus and His first disciples in Luke 17. Jesus was constantly teaching about everyday values and practices. Here He tells His disciples that they would need to forgive others, even if they had been wronged, seven times in a single day. He wasn’t talking about some institutional health here but a way of life. He was referring to the simple but challenging act of confronting another with their sin and voicing forgiveness. This is the stuff of everyday relationships.

It is hard to confront, though, isn’t it? And it is hard to forgive. The roots of bitterness run deep and last long, like tree roots — like mulberry tree roots, stubborn and strong. No wonder the disciples responded to Jesus’ challenge to forgive with the words, “*Increase our faith*” (Luke 17:5). They could have said, “Good Lord! You expect us to forgive like that and that often? Now that’s challenging! We need greater faith for that! Give us greater faith, Lord!”

It was one of those teaching moments. So when His disciples said, “*Increase our faith!*” Jesus did not say, “Sure, presto! May you have greater faith!” What He did say was, “*If you had faith*

like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.'

Jesus doesn't explain his response. Luke, who records Jesus' words, doesn't interpret them either. You have to admit, it's quite an image, though. With just a little faith, Jesus is saying — faith as small as a mustard seed, the faith you have right now — you can uproot a thirty-foot mulberry tree and plant it at the bottom of the sea. I can imagine a Christian saying to a mulberry tree, "Pull up your roots and head for the ocean, tree! You will be the first mulberry tree successfully transplanted to the ocean floor!" Then we see, of all things, this mulberry tree flying off to its new surroundings, 4000 feet below sea level!

So what is Jesus saying here? For one thing He is saying that it is not helpful to quantify our faith. Jesus' disciples were doing that with their request, "*Increase our faith!*" In other words, "Jesus, give us more faith, heroic faith, enough faith to do the hard thing in hard times." Jesus' response says that it is not helpful to make faith a quantifiable possession. We say that, don't we? "If only I had enough faith!" "If I could just believe enough!" Or, negatively, we say, "I guess I just don't have enough faith!" Notice how the weight of those statements is on us. Can we believe enough? Can we trust enough? Do we have enough faith to make things happen?

So if faith is not to be quantified, how do we understand Jesus' words, "*faith like a grain of mustard seed*"? How can faith send mulberry trees flying into the sea? I believe that Jesus' concept of faith puts the whole matter of faith into our relationship with Him. "*Faith like a grain of mustard seed*" is simply trust in Him, a trust that abides in Him, depends on Him, and lives every day in Him. It is only in Christ that we move mulberry trees, even the deep ones like bitterness or a lack of forgiveness. That is possible only as Christ lives in us.

In Latin there are two words for faith. The first is *fides*, which might be said to be quantifiable. It is faith that certain things are true. *Fides* says, "I believe that ... that God created the world ... that Jesus was born of a virgin ... that Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead ... that the Spirit brings life." Our creeds are examples of *fides*. The other word for faith in Latin is *fiducia*. This is relational faith. It is trust in the Lord, being rooted in the power of God. *Fiducia* was Martin Luther's preferred word for faith. You can hear *fiducia* at work in Paul's familiar words in Philippians 4:13, *I can do all things through him [Christ] who strengthens me*.

So "*faith like a grain of mustard seed*" says that I can forgive not so much because I have enough faith to do it but rather because I live and make decisions inside a strong relationship with Jesus Christ. "*Faith like a grain of mustard seed*" says I already have what I need to live my Christian life and witness: I have Christ, or better, Christ has me! The One who came and died for me, the One who broke through death and came to life for me, the One who called me in Baptism and made me His own — He makes seemingly impossible things possible.

So, in Christ, I confront the person who has wronged me, and I offer forgiveness. I do the hard thing and share my faith with my neighbor. I make time to pack food for the hungry when I thought I was too busy. I drop a quarter in an LWML mite box, believing it will make a difference. I hold the hand of a neighbor in the hospital, maybe not my favorite neighbor. I phone a friend who has become distant.

So, in Christ, our church takes on a new ministry, knowing that it will be a stretch, simply because it is what Christ would have us do. So we see our community not as the enemy, but as our mission field. And underneath it all, you hear mulberry trees moving — hard things, seemingly impossible things, happening because Christ lives within me, because Christ lives within us!

The Lutheran Women's Missionary League has always lived by mustard seed faith. Little gifts, mites, combined across our synod, make big things happen in mission across the world. Christ has been moving mulberry trees through the LWML since 1942. What a model they are for Christian discipleship! If our congregations are the soul of the LCMS; if our pastors, workers, and missionaries are the beautiful feet of the LCMS; if our seminaries and universities are the mind of the LCMS; if Lutheran Hour Ministries is the voice of the LCMS; then the LWML is the heart of the LCMS. The women of our church have taught us what it means to move mulberry trees with just a little faith.

In another gospel Jesus talks about moving mountains with mustard seed faith. Here it is the mulberry tree that gets moved. Either way, the message is the same. In our relationship with Jesus, we have what is necessary to do difficult, even seemingly impossible, things. And why should that be so hard to believe? He has moved us from death to life, from being orphans to being His, from guilt to cleansing, from conflict to reconciliation.

A painting by Vincent van Gogh is titled "The Mulberry Tree." (*Show painting on screen or print copy for bulletin. See www.vggallery.com/painting/p_0637.htm*) He painted it in 1889 while in voluntary confinement at the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy, France. The mulberry tree van Gogh gives us is impressive. It is strong, gnarly, abundant with bushy foliage, and, in his painting, rich with tones of yellow and gold. It is formidable, rooted in rock and set against a deep blue sky. For van Gogh, an ordinary tree took on the character of beauty, strength, and even joy. Yellow was his color for joy.

May that be our attitude the next time we say that it is difficult to follow Christ. What appears to be hard, and even impossible, may be just the thing we need to do as we live with Christ day-in-day-out. And because Christ abides with us, the difficult thing can be done with joy. It may not be easy, but it is possible in Christ. May it be said of us, "Those were the days when Christians moved mulberry trees!" Amen.