

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
Luke 17:5 ff

*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."*

*Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely
more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from
generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus
for ever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20, 21*

“If I just had more faith...” I think most of us have struggled with this at some point in our lives. *If I just had more faith* I wouldn’t have so many questions or doubts. *If I just had more faith* everything would be easier. *If I just had more faith* I’d understand why things are the way they are. *If I just had more faith* I would be a better person, a better parent, a better spouse. *If I just had more faith* I would know what to do—I could handle things better. *If I just had more faith* life would be different. Even the disciples seemed to fumble with this approach to faith. They asked Jesus, “*Increase our faith.*” It seems like a reasonable request. If a little is good, a lot must be better. But Jesus is very clear—faithfulness is not about size or quantity.

“If you had faith the size of a mustard seed,” he says, “you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

As a child I was given a silver charm with a mustard seed in a tiny glass globe. I treasured it. There was something about it’s message that I understood.

It doesn’t take much of something that’s good to make a difference. It doesn’t take much, but the right stuff at the right time, can move mountains.

That was the message I heard. Mulberry trees or mountains—This saying is recorded six different times in four of the Gospels, each time somewhat modified. A version of it also appears in the Gospel of Thomas—that earlier collection of sayings written before the other canonical gospels by 20-30 years. Thomas combines themes about the value of unity and harmony with the common Jesus tradition about “faith moving mountains.” Moving mountains! That’s what I like! Imagine the power to move mountains!

It was my grandfather, Jackson Corpening Tuttle. (I remember him as an old man with big strong hands). He was born in the hills of Western North Carolina, one of nine children. All but one, who died, went to college. He studied engineering at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. It was my grandfather, the engineer, who told me that to move big things you didn't have to have great strength. He said that the secret is "leverage." There's an image—Faith is like angles and propped sticks—like move the center of balance farther over on a seesaw! I've been leveraging things ever since. I think "leverage" may be another understanding about faith because there's a certain amount of trust in leveraging. There's commitment. And expectation. And a certainty or hope. Working it out 'cause you know what's on the line.

What is on the line? What was on the line for the people Luke was writing for? What were they most concerned about? Perhaps that early Christian community was getting stuck—stuck in their old ways or ways that weren't working. Maybe they doubted the impact of their mission and ministry. Perhaps they were facing a major shift in leadership. They understood the disciples' request—*Increase our faith!*

Years ago when Epiphany Church was building The Conboy Center and restoring the Chapel—putting it all on the line—there were more than a few moments of doubt and fear. Not everyone agreed about moving forward. Somewhere in the mix someone said,

We aren't called to be successful. We're called to be faithful.

The question isn't "Can we do this," but "Is God with us?" With an ounce of trust, mountains do quake... *and they do move*. We have witnessed it.

Once there was a mountain climber who wanted to climb to the top of a high peak. He was almost near the top when his foot slipped and he began to fall. He grabbed onto a small branch growing out of a crevice and hung on for dear life. He looked up and called out for help.

"Is anyone up there?"

In a loud clap of thunder he heard a voice.

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

"It is I, God."

"What shall I do?"

"Let go, and I'll catch you."

The man called out again,

"Is there anyone else up there?"

The question is not “How much faith we have,” but rather, “Are we living the faith we do have?” Faith is a trust, a relationship with God through Christ. A relationship with Jesus changes our lives, all our relationships, changes our goals, our direction—and moves mountains. If faith is a relationship with God in Christ, then the mustard seed is already planted within us. We already have enough. We already are enough. We do not need more.

Here’s how it happens:

“One day when St. Francis went out to meditate in the fields he was passing by the church of San Damiano which was about to collapse because of extreme age. Inspired by the Spirit, he went inside to pray. Kneeling before an image of the Jesus on the cross. His eyes filled with tears and he heard a voice coming from the cross telling him three times: “*Francis, go and repair my house which, as you see, is falling into ruin.*” Amazed and trembling with fear, Francis received this message in his heart and was overcome. When he returned to his senses, he put his whole heart into obeying the command he received. And he began zealously to repair the church...”

The moment recounted above took place in 1204.... Now, as then, the voice of Jesus calls to us—the relationship with God through Christ speaks to us across boundaries of time and place. Faith is not measured out according to how difficult the task or work before us. Faith is not a thing we have or get. Faith is a relationship of trust and love. This one faith-relationship, God in Christ, is the center of who we are and how we will choose to live. The center of balance of life’s seesaw shifts. There’s new *leverage*. We carry this relationship wherever we go, in all that we are and all that we do. Because we are loved abundantly, we also can share this love without counting the cost. There is always enough. There is always more. It’s not that faith changes the circumstances of our lives, but instead, it changes us. Faith does not shield us from the pain and difficulties of life, it does not undo the past, and it does not guarantee a particular future. But it does mean that we are not alone when we face difficulties and losses, joys and successes, opportunities and possibilities. It is the way we *live and move and have our being*. It is an openness, a trust, a love. It is the lens through which we see ourselves, others, and the world. We live by faith not because we have enough faith but because we have faith, any faith, even mustard seed sized faith. The faith that is in us declares:

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20, 21

I'm excited to share with you something that has been in the works for awhile now. It's a story of faith and trust and even leverage. A few months ago we determined that the agreement between Epiphany Church and a child care company who has been leasing the Conboy Center would not be renewed. Terms could not be met. It seems like the right time to make a change. Financially it was not an easy decision. We depend upon this rental income to meet our annual expenses. The use of the facility we built 21 years ago was financially driven. There has been a business plan that allowed us to build the center as well as restore of the interior and exterior of the Chapel because of the rental income. The Conboy Center has been the financial engine for about \$3 Million worth of *building up* the Church. We have gotten dependent on the income it produced. But it has also tied our hands, tied up the facility and tied up our mission. Now, without a rental lease, no more income. Here's what falling off this mountain looks like: *An opportunity. Maybe a blessing.* Now is the time for us to be mission-driven rather than financially-driven. All of us, together. Here's how we can do it:

On December 31 of this year, with approval from the National Church, I'm going to retire but continue working right here after retirement. It's called "Retiring in place." Don't worry about me. After 42 years of ordained ministry and one of the oldest pension plans in the country and a small subsidy, my monthly check will do just fine. If we all, together, live into our faith, over a two year period, we will save \$150,000, making it possible for us to live into a new plan, a new way of using the resources that we have. And for me, personally, I am given the grace of seeing the fulfillment of the work we began together and to be part of a new chapter where faith leads the way. It's a time when we can listen more closely, trust each other, and do what Christ asks us to do.

"Let go, I'll catch you!" This is what faith looks like. We don't need more, we only need what we've already been given. *God in Christ. And Christ in each other.* And a little leverage.

Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20, 21