

# MUSTARD FAITH

LUKE 17:5-6

SERMON PREACHED BY RACHEL JOINER AT ST. MARK'S, AUSTIN ON OCTOBER 2, 2022

It is a blessing to be with you this morning, and for those of you who I haven't met yet and may be wondering why a woman you've never seen before is preaching, let me introduce myself. My name is Rachel Joiner. I am in my second year at the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin. I am a postulant from the Dioceses of West Texas, and now have the honor of being at St. Mark's for the next two years as your seminarian. I look forward to getting to know you and learning and growing with you.

*Luke 17:5 The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 6 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.*

Did you know Jesus likes mustard? I mean seriously, Jesus likes mustard. He does!

It might be at this moment you might be thinking you need to talk to Father Zac, Mother Mary, or Dr. Jennings (because he is one of my professors) about the "seminarian." Jesus really does seem to like mustard because he mentions mustard, specifically the mustard seed, five times in the New Testament while teaching and preaching.

In Matt. 13: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed

Matt. 17: For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed

Mustard again in

Mark 4 and Luke 13: It is like a mustard seed

Look, those three semesters of Bible are paying off!

This passage, with the mustard seed, from Luke follows verses where Jesus warns about being a stumbling block to others; to be on guard regarding sin, and he teaches that if someone sins against you, that you should forgive them (even if it is seven times a day). It would seem the apostles were listening closely to what Jesus was teaching because they respond with the exclamation:

*"Increase our faith!"*

They have requested for their faith to be greater. They already have faith, but these teachings... ..do not cause others to sin, guard against sin, love your enemies, do not judge, and this radical, *wild notion* of forgiving people, and not just forgiving them once, but over and over again.

And just go ahead and add Jesus mixing, mingling, and welcoming Gentiles, women, Samaritans, and whomever else they might meet along the way; well, an exclamatory statement of some kind would seem to be in order.

Jesus' teachings are tough, and the apostles' way of being, knowing, and doing has been uprooted, turned upside down, and it would seem they feel their faith is not yet deep enough to fulfill these expectations.

Jesus is such an effective teacher, and I have some training on which to stake my claim.

Do we have any educators present today? I'm raising my hand because that was my calling before this one. I was a teacher, a coach, and an administrator. As an administrator I was tasked with evaluating teachers. These evaluations were often met with dread. Before the actual evaluation, I met with each teacher to discuss the lesson, their students, any special circumstances I might need to be aware of, and to review the expectations. In this meeting I shared explicitly, and repeatedly, that the evaluation was an opportunity. I was a teacher helping another teacher figure out what areas they were already proficient in and areas where they might not yet be proficient. An overall "proficient" rating was the goal.

Jesus would rate "proficient" in his teaching; actually, even though I'm probably a bit biased, I'm going to have to say he would rate "accomplished" and "distinguished" in many areas. Hey, there's a rubric folks, and his teaching checks off many of the boxes.

Lessons that connect to students' prior knowledge, experiences, and future learning expectations.

Anticipates student mistakes and encourages students to avoid common pitfalls.

Advocates for the needs of all students.

Displays extensive content knowledge of all the subjects she or he teaches.

Uses possible student misunderstandings at strategic points in lessons to highlight misconceptions and inspire exploration and discovery.

Jesus is teaching a new way of being, knowing, and doing. The apostles already know and understand some concepts, but he knows they are not yet proficient in others.

I think the way we read this next verse is important. The way a teacher delivers a message is just as important as the content of the message. And how the teacher speaks will affect how the message is received.

I have heard this verse many times, and often, from what seemed to be a place of scarcity and criticism. I would like to offer another reading; from a place of abundance and speak in what I imagine a voice of a caring, supportive teacher, a teacher like Jesus.

*Luke 17:6 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.*

Uprooting a mulberry tree, moving it, and planting it in the sea is impossible, it's ludicrous, it's absurd; kind of like forgiving someone who has sinned against you, even if it is seven times a day.

But here is Jesus, teaching at the distinguished level, posing a scenario that is not intended to produce some enlightening answer, but already has an obvious answer to make or emphasize a point; Jesus uses a rhetorical idiom.

Y'all, I taught math for most of my teaching career, so in the spirit of full disclosure, I had to look that one up!

Jesus' answer is meant to help the apostles understand a profound, but simple message:

You only need a small amount of faith, to follow me, and do all these things; a tiny bit of faith to do the impossible, and what might seem ludicrous or absurd.

You already have faith, you can uproot the old ways, and live into this new way... even if, and maybe in spite of feeling like, you're **not yet** there.

Beloved that is faith - the substance of things hoped for yet unseen.

For us, as Christians, this already, not yet is known to us too. We are called to live in the already, and live into the not yet, and it is tough, isn't it? Christ has already died, Christ has already risen, and Christ will come again, but he has not yet come.

We live in this place of injustice, among the unhoused, the persecuted, the refugee. We live in this place of tears, of mourning, and witness the pain and death of God's beloved children. We are well aware that all things have not yet been made new.

So, how can we live in this place of already, and into the not yet?

Forgiving the person that cuts us off on I-35 or MOPAC, even seven times, on the way to our destination.

Loving our neighbor even when the candidate signs in their yard don't match the ones that might be in ours.

Being present with, and willing to listen to, folks that have different ideas, views, or identities.

Welcoming the stranger, seeking justice, and loving mercy.

In my short time among you, I have witnessed, and discovered, you, St. Mark's, this community, already living into the not yet...

Volunteering, greeting, ushering, caring for the altar, serving at the altar, acolyting, reading the lessons, singing in the choir, preparing coffee, bringing tacos, and probably a host of other tasks I haven't mentioned or even know about, are completed by members of this congregation in order to love and serve the Lord, each other, and new folks that might show up to St. Mark's each Sunday.

Living into the not yet by offering time, toiletries, towels, and loving presence so unhoused women can take a shower, hear a kind word, and have a bit of peace and respite.

Supporting immigrants and asylum-seekers of Casa Marianella, Refugee Services of Texas, and Team Brownsville is living into the not yet.

The blessing of pets on the front lawn this morning, and later at Community First Village where people who are coming out of chronic homelessness are loved and served and supported by this community of Christ followers sure seems like living into the not yet.

In a few minutes from now we will participate in the Eucharist, a celebration of the already, and not yet. My former priest, and dear friend Father Daniel Strandlund would invite us to the table of the Lord with the invitation I am about to share. This invitation touches on faith, and recognizes living in the already, and into the not yet.

*This is the table, not of the church, but of the Lord, it is made ready for those who love God and for those who want to love God more. So come, you who have much faith and you who have little; You who have been here often, and you who have not been here long; You who have tried to follow, and you who have failed. Come, because it is the Lord who invites you.*

Amen.