

“THE WIDENESS OF STEADFAST FAITH”

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Luke 17:5-10

(10-06-19) World Communion Sunday

When our children were younger I would share a reading from scripture with them each night. Usually it was the passage I was preaching on that week and I shared the same passage each night of the week. Once when I was preparing to preach on this passage, when I got the part about having faith enough to say to a mulberry tree, be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you, my kids were unusually attentive. One of them asked me, hey dad, have you ever made a tree jump into the ocean? Of course I had to admit that, no; I have not ever made a tree jump into the ocean. Well why not, they asked. **I said, maybe you shouldn't take everything so literally.**

Jesus most often used parables, a form of fictitious narrative, often used as an analogy, to get a point across. But Jesus also used **hyperbole** to get his points across. That doesn't mean that Jesus lied, rather that Jesus would push a point to an extreme so that people would understand his intention. So, when Jesus says, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out, or if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, either we'd all be walking around without hands and blind as a bat, or we understand that Jesus is using hyperbole to impress upon us the seriousness of sin.

I've said this before, that a key point of biblical interpretation is, a text without context is merely a pretext. Often we hear phrases such as if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could make trees jump into the ocean or move mountains, and we are told that it means that we need to increase our faith.

We are told that if we are not experiencing such spectacular manifestations of the spirit it is because we lack faith. If only we had **more** faith we wouldn't be in this financial hole.

If only we had **more** faith our relationships would all work out. If only we had **more** faith our health would improve and our sick loved ones would get better. **But what if it's not a matter of having more faith?**

Let's look at the context.

Just prior to our text this morning, Jesus was telling his followers about the challenges of discipleship. When someone sins against us and they repent, we must forgive them, says Jesus. And even if they were to sin against us seven times a day, if they are truly repentant, we must truly forgive them. In response to such hard teachings, the disciples said to Jesus, increase our faith! It's **then** that Jesus says that if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could make trees jump into oceans.

The response of Jesus is to tell the disciples, listen, **you don't need more faith.**

You have **enough** faith already. All you need is faith as small as a mustard seed.

All you need is the tiniest amount of faith to accomplish amazing feats of faithfulness.

So don't tell me you don't have enough faith. You have all the faith you need.

What you **don't need** are the excuses, the reasons, all the justifications why you can't forgive a person as many times as needed. So really, the text isn't about **not having enough faith**, but about why, given the faith **we already have**, we are so **reluctant** to use it, so **hesitant** to live as faithful disciples of Jesus.

There's a difference between the **spectacular** and the **steadfast**. Getting trees to jump into oceans is all about the spectacular, but having to forgive someone who

constantly gets on our bad side, who continually disappoints us, who endlessly tests our patience, well, that's all about the steadfast. **I wonder which one is truly harder!**

There's a ministry in Calgary actually called the Mustard Seed. It started because of the steadfast faith of 4 men from First Baptist Church who took a chance on a young, troubled, drug dealing kid named Pat Nixon. Pat was homeless at 12 years of age, and in an adult prison by the time he was 16. But the men took Pat under their care, even though he stole from them, even though he turned, time and time again to crime, and finally they got through to him. Pat accepted Jesus as his Lord and began a coffee house in the church basement. Over time that small project became the Mustard Seed Ministry, a groundbreaking ministry to the homeless and hurting in Calgary, housing and feeding thousands of homeless and hungry people over the years. It may seem spectacular now, but it started with the steadfast faith of 4 men who wouldn't let a young troubled kid push them away.

What is more important for the kind of world God wants, the spectacular or the steadfast? Anyone who's ever been to the Grand Canyon knows just how spectacular it is. But the wonder of it all is that this massive sculpting of the earth was all started by the Colorado River and over the last 17 million years the flow of the river has carved what is now the Grand Canyon. It is the work of steadfastness that sometimes results in the truly spectacular. **And isn't this also often the way of faith?**

Jesus tells us, listen, you already have all the faith you need. You don't need to beat yourself up over the fact that you can't get trees to jump into oceans.

You don't need to feel guilty if your loved one doesn't get better even though you prayed with every ounce of strength you had, or your relationships don't heal despite

your faithful efforts, or despite the fact that God knows you need it, unexpected cheques aren't suddenly appearing in the mail. It's not your lack of faith that's to blame. We have the faith we need, what we need is the courage to act in that faith, what we need is to be faithful, to be steadfast in our faithfulness. **It doesn't mean that if we are faithful, if we are steadfast, that we should expect the spectacular.** More often than not the spectacular **doesn't** happen. Our beloved sick still die, our fractured relationships don't mend, our financial black holes don't suddenly disappear.

So then, does our faith and our faithfulness make a difference?

Absolutely it does. When the disappointments and griefs of life don't change, faith is about not blaming ourselves, but finding our strength in the God who won't let us go, in the God who loves us so desperately. Faith is about getting off the floor and knowing that however high the hill is that lies in front of us, God walks with us. Faith is about holding on to the hope that things don't always remain the way they are, but that because God is God, light will shine in the darkness, love will win out over hate and life will prevail over death.

One writer says that transitive verbs like to have faith or believing, must have an object. So we don't usually say I believe, but I believe **in** someone or something. When Jesus says, if you have faith, there must be an object to that faith. We don't just **have** faith; we have faith **in** something or someone. Because it is the object of faith rather than the subject that is key, **because God is the object of our faith** even as we are the subjects of that faith, the tiniest act of faith in the unconditionally good God gives us amazing hope. Don't get me wrong, spectacular isn't outside God's vocabulary, but more often than not, God seems to prefer **that we discover that if**

something seems spectacular, it's because of a long and faithful lead up of steadfastness.

And Jesus warns us, don't go around looking for compliments, just do your job. If you follow baseball, you know that it's the postseason. The baseball postseason begins with the wildcard game, a one game winner take all showdown to get the chance to move on to the next round. Earlier this week I watched part of the National League wildcard game. The Milwaukee Brewers were leading the Washington Nationals 3-1 in the bottom of the 8th inning. Washington had struggled all game to score. Now with only 6 outs left before the end of their season, it would've been easy for every player to try to be the hero, to try for the spectacular homerun to overcome their deficit.

The first Washington batter in that inning was barely hit by a pitch on his wrist. But because he was hit, he got on base. The next batter, Ryan Zimmerman, was the longest tenured Washington player, who was on the roster when the franchise first began back in 2005. By the way, this is the team that the Montreal Expos eventually became. Zimmerman is 35 years old, pretty old by baseball standards and he wasn't in the starting lineup. He was a pinch hitter, one of the hardest roles in baseball. You just sit there all game long, then suddenly your manager tells you that you're going to pinch hit for another player. It's your job, you just have to go out there and do your job. Zimmerman fouled off a number of pitches before one last pitch broke his bat, but not before he was able to muscle a hit just barely out of the infield. He got a single, and now there were two National players on base. He did his job. The next batter was the team's best player, Anthony Rendon. He hit 34 home runs this year, for those of you who don't follow baseball, that's a lot. With two players on

base, Rendon could have swung for the fences, trying to hit a homerun, and it could have made him a hero. But with the count full, 3 balls and 2 strikes, knowing that the pitcher would have to make a good pitch to him, instead of trying to hit the spectacular homerun, he took the pitch, it was a ball, and he walked. As the team's best player, no one would have blamed him for trying to do the spectacular, but he just did his job, got the walk - bases loaded.

Later I found out that Rendon is a Christian. In an interview he gave with a reporter, he said, "I have my faith in God. I was told to be humble before him. Don't boast about what you have done. Don't put credit in your own hands. You have to realize He got you there." Just do your job. The next batter got a hit, a simple hit, but it got past the outfielder and because all three players before had just done their jobs, nothing spectacular, that simple hit scored 3 runs and the Washington Nationals took the lead for the first time and they held on to win the game. A spectacular win, but built on the steadfast play of players just doing their job.

Our job as disciples is to be faithful. What is the reward for a life of faithfulness?

The reward is that life of faithfulness. Faithfulness is its own reward. There is much wisdom in this. There's something very liberating about not having to worry about what others think of us, whether what we do is being seen by others and being appropriately appreciated. It's got to be so tiring to constantly project a certain image or exude a certain air about ourselves so that others can see how important we are or how faithful we have been. Wouldn't it be much more liberating to just be faithful without expectation, to put all our energies into doing what is expected of us as disciples of Jesus instead of trying to impress people? The reward for a life of faithfulness is that life of faithfulness. **Faithfulness is its own reward.**

That's not to say that we toil at a meaningless, thankless task. With every steadfast act of faithfulness, that small mustard seed grows and grows, until one day it becomes the largest of shrubs, offering shelter for many birds. On this World Communion Sunday, hearing the scriptures read in various languages reminds us that though our faith may be a small thing, **we are not alone**. Our faith is not in ourselves, but in God **and in God the smallest amount of faith has amazing potential**.

Our faith is part of a global faith. All around the world this morning there are people whose prayer is that they might be faithful, steadfast servants of Jesus Christ.

There is wideness to steadfast faith. Friends, we are not alone.

Jesus had a vision for what this world needs to look like, a vision of good news for the poor, a vision of release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

The wideness of steadfast faith is knowing that we might not achieve the spectacular but that we are called to be steadfast in our faith. It's knowing that in just doing our job, just doing what we know we can be doing, not being paralyzed by the daunting nature of the difficulties we face, we are joining with billions of Christians all over the world, in every city and town in our country, in places like China and Korea, in Ghana, Nigeria, South America, in the Philippines, in Indonesia, all over the world, that together, we in the wideness of steadfast faith can work in our small ways because we believe that God is doing the big thing, renewing creation, preparing to unveil a kingdom that will be more spectacular than we can ever imagine.

There is still much work to do to make Jesus' vision more and more our reality. It won't necessarily happen through spectacular acts, it will more likely take many, many acts of steadfast faith, many acts that won't ever get acknowledged, but each act building upon others, until one day the spectacular promise of God's kingdom reign will be on earth as it is in heaven. **So what's our part, what's yours?**

Because God is the object of our faith, the issue isn't that our faith is too small. If God is the object of faith, even the smallest amount of faith can do amazing things.

We need to courage and steadfastness to believe that our faith, even our small faith, can make a difference. We need to trust that God will use us, even our small faith, to work the reign of his kingdom on earth. We need to live with faith, however small it may be, knowing that it probably won't be spectacular, but that it will be what God desires.

For the task that still lies ahead, Jesus invites us to his table to know his love and his promise. A small act of faithfulness, the sacrificial death of a regional preacher in the backwaters of the biggest empire the world had ever seen. Just another crucifixion of just another rabble rouser. **At least that's how it would have seemed.** But by that seemingly small act of faithfulness God spectacularly turned the world upside down. **Life reigns, love wins, light shines.** But there's still much work to do.

As faithful disciples, who are invited to do our part, to do our job, Jesus invites us to come and share in him, the one who strengthens us, the one who encourages us, the one who feeds us for the journey yet ahead. So let us come and share in God's faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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