

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on October 3, 2010 (Proper 22, Year C)

Do you have any idea how small a mustard seed actually is? I don't because I get my mustard out of a bottle. Preferably Dijon. But Jesus' apostles knew – French's Yellow Mustard in the squeezable plastic bottle hadn't yet been invented – which is why Jesus could talk about having faith the size of a mustard seed. His audience got it; they understood that this was the smallest of all the seeds which made the mustard seed an effective metaphor for describing a miniscule amount of faith. Because even a tiny amount of faith, Jesus tells us, can not only move trees but even mountains. And our response is usually, "Yeah right." Because in my experience and, presumably, yours faith has not moved so much as an ant hill. At least not literally.

Which, of course, misses the point. Something the apostles regularly do in their earthly interactions with Jesus. Jesus talks about the faith of a mustard seed in response to an insistent demand the apostles set before him: "Increase our faith!" Which seems almost comical – like going to the gym and yelling at a personal trainer "Increase my fitness!" or going to a library and demanding of the librarian "Increase my knowledge!"

Comical until we realize how often we demand the same thing in our own lives, at least when it comes to our faith. We want an unabated path to God; we don't want to deal with doubts or questions; we want faith the size not of a mustard seed but of an avocado seed (or whatever might be a metaphorically large seed). And so consciously or not we often pray for God to take the shackles off of our hearts so that we may believe without trepidation and fear in order to be led into a place of pure spiritual freedom and peace. As if Jesus were less the master builder and more the master jailer, able to unlock the hearts of those who pray hard enough or well enough or intensely enough.

At other times we envision ourselves as spiritual Houdinis, struggling mightily to free our hearts from the chains that bind us; trying to do it all by ourselves. We see ourselves as the faith-life equivalent of Horatio Alger, seeking to lift ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps. Believing that we can will ourselves to spiritual freedom through our own protestant work ethic, forgetting that we can't, in fact, do this ourselves. We can't get to the promised land of fruitful relationship with God while ignoring not only the encouragement we need from the wider Christian community but also Jesus himself. "With God's help" is a major theme of our Baptismal Covenant for good reason – we cannot "increase our faith" without some major help along the way.

The good news here is that, according to the Second Letter to Timothy, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." I should say that I'm partial to the two letters to Timothy simply because of my own name. Sometimes I feel that they were written specifically to me, which of course they were just as all of Scripture was

written directly to each one of us. But if you have a Biblical name, be it Paul or Mary or Peter or Martha or even Titus or Bartholomew, you've probably felt a similar connection to various passages of Scripture. And I guess I should admit that I've had a particular fantasy of one day being called to a St. Timothy's Episcopal Church mostly so that I could answer the phone, "Good morning, St. Tim's; Tim speaking." But I digress.

What does it mean to claim our promise of living according to a "spirit of power and love and self-discipline?" It mostly means casting aside the spirit of fear which so often binds our hearts and keeps us from reveling in our relationship with the risen Christ. It is fear that keeps us from being open and vulnerable with one another and with God; it is fear that keeps us from freely sharing our resources with a community of faith; it is fear that keeps us from fully engaging our faith with heart and mind and soul. Fear that God will *not* provide; fear that our sins are not forgiven; fear that the promise of eternal life is a myth.

So to live in a spirit of power and love is to have a spirit of trust. And to enter into that place of trust is to allow Jesus to increase your faith. Not you alone by praying more or harder or reading the Bible more regularly or with more intensity – though these are all good things – but by allowing Jesus Christ to lead you by the hand, to open your heart, and to walk with you on this journey of life and faith wherever it may lead and into whatever you might encounter. Thus guiding you through the fear that characterizes and drives so much of our lives, to that abounding and limitless freedom and peace that truly does pass all understanding.

If we do get to the point of asking Jesus to increase our faith it's worth asking "why?" What do we want out of an increased faith? If we want faith that will simply make us comfortable or keep us blissfully unaware we'll be barking up the wrong mulberry tree. When I was in seminary I did a lot of work as a chaplain with Alzheimer's patients. Now anyone who has experienced this disease as a family member or friend knows the profound toll it takes on both the individual and loved ones. The person you love slowly slips away right before your eyes and you end up grieving twice – once while the person is still alive and again when they succumb to the disease as everyone eventually does. But there is a time in the middle of these extremes where the afflicted person becomes blissfully unaware of their affliction. The Alzheimer's patient may truly believe that he or she is younger or living in a different country. They are mentally transported to a different time in their lives and the worries of losing touch with reality slip away because they indeed have lost touch with reality. Whatever you do or say cannot bring them back and so the medical professionals encourage those who interact with them to simply engage them where they are. And, strange as it sounds, they become some of the happiest people I've ever known. Their worries are gone, they're not concerned with issues of life and death, they live in the moment because that is literally all they have.

And sometimes when we ask God to increase our faith, that's what we imagine. A state of pure, unadulterated bliss where our questions and fears and worries evaporate and we can live happily ever after fueled by the knowledge that God will take care of us and everything will be well and

all manner of things will be well. A place of spiritual certainty where all of our questions suddenly dissolve into answers; a place where doubt and uncertainty is vanquished.

But that's being out of touch with the reality of faith. Increased faith, however that might manifest itself in our individual lives, doesn't mean that unfortunate events will never occur. Rather, it brings us to an increased awareness that Jesus is with us at every step of the journey. That's what it means to have increased faith; that we leave behind fear and cowardice and enter into a spirit of power and love and self-discipline.

And it all starts with faith the size of a mustard seed – which I understand is a very small amount. It doesn't take a huge infusion of faith; just a small, ordinary amount. God working his power within us can increase our faith. We just need ask.