

**World Communion Sunday, Galena, Illinois
Ecumenical Worship, Galena Middle School
October 6, 2013**

**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Text--Luke 17: 5-10**

This is not the first time that Jesus has talked about mustard seeds. We remember in three of the gospels, the parables of what the Kingdom of Heaven might be like: the planting of the smallest of seeds that becomes the enormous tree providing shade for all of the birds. And in two gospels faith the size of a mustard seed moving mountains from here to there; mulberry trees being uprooted and thrown into the sea.

Unlike many of Jesus' parables, this one seems fairly straight forward, at least at first glance. His hyperbole shows us that the tiniest, most insignificant of things gives unexpected and enormous growth. Just a wee speck of faith has the potential for great outcomes.

This faith was what the disciples were asking for. They weren't interested in growing giant trees or astonishing feats like moving mountains or trees. I mean, really, who would want to uproot a tree and throw it into the Mississippi River—unless it was looming over your roof, certain to come down in the next Galena wind storm.

No, they were asking for more faith at this particular time—a time when they were still on the road to Jerusalem with Jesus, the last journey before his crucifixion and death. A time when Jesus was filling them with hard stories and difficult teachings meant to ready them for their roles as disciples in his absence. Impossible-seeming roles. No doubt they were overwhelmed and thought that an extra infusion of faith was needed before they could even begin to meet Jesus' expectations.

It's not so different for us, is it? When we are challenged—our health, loss, hardship, when we lie awake in the night worrying about how we will face the morning, we might lament our deficit of faith. If only we had more, if only our faith was stronger, deeper, perhaps we could cope.

Jesus' response to the disciples was surprising—a bit like a slap in the face considering their distress: “if you had faith the size of a mustard seed...” But wait. We should know that the word we have translated as “if” might also mean “since.” “*Since* you have faith the

size of a mustard seed...” In other words, you already have it. You have enough. And anyway, it’s not about measuring. Faith is faith. It just is. It’s not about size.

This was true for the disciples—the twelve in 1st century Israel and each of us. It is true for each of us and for our churches today.

Each of us in this room—Presbyterian, Lutheran, United Methodist, Episcopalian—each of us shares in a common heritage and faith. We stand in the line of 16th century reformers whose desire was to return Christ’s church to faithfulness. Their passion was great, and, as we can see, it led to separations on doctrine, practices, and organization.

Centuries later, our denominations shared and were changed by the liturgical and ecumenical movements in the 20th century. The ideal was to achieve Jesus’ hope in John’s gospel, “that all may be one.” This unity has not been achieved, but we came closer—there were mergers, full communion partnerships, and, perhaps, most of all a convergence in worship. If you don’t believe me, take a good look at our various hymnals, our worship books. If you don’t believe me, think about the Psalm that we just sang--it was a lusty singing to a tune familiar to all of us. If you don’t believe me, pay very close attention as we come to the Table in a little while. Our celebration of communion/the Lord’s Supper, Eucharist will not be exactly what any of our congregations are used to. BUT I expect it will be very familiar to all of us in the words, the actions.

Yes, some of us celebrate communion just once each month, and others weekly. Some of us serve grape juice, while others partake of wine, and some offer both. Some of us use chalices and come forward to the altar while others are served individual cups in the pews. And our understandings of the sacrament differs. But it is more a spectrum of meanings than an absolute “this” or “that,” and I believe that much of that spectrum is present in each of our denominations and that the meanings overlap.

I do not foresee the day when we will all be united, speaking with a single, uniform voice. But we are close partners in essentials—in our baptism in Christ, part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. And we all strive to be faithful to that even with our different ways and understandings.

We all share in something else, too. We are all labeled as “mainline” (for some, “old line”) churches. And as such we have all been under fire for years—maybe around 25 years or so. We are said to be dying, dull and boring, irrelevant. This judgment comes from statistics of decline in membership since the “good old days” of the 1950s. And there is truth in it. We are all smaller starting in the 60s and on—coinciding with massive social

change including a distrust of all kinds of institutions, including the church. This decline coincides also with the rise and growth of evangelical churches, some of which became what we call “mega churches” that swelled into communities in the 1,000s or even 10,000s. They used marketing strategies to go after those who had rejected the institutional churches, the “seekers” who would be turned off by overtly religious symbols, “boring” music and sermons. So they stripped out the crosses, stained glass windows, and organs, replaced lectionary readings with a Bible verse or two and sermons with “relevant” skits, and hymns and anthems with praise choruses.

I remember my days in seminary and my early ministry (mid-90s into the first decade of the 21st c.) when denominations scrambled to give us books and send us to workshops to learn those mega church techniques. I remember the debates on traditional worship vs. contemporary, separate services or blended. Some tried to reinvent themselves. Some were reasonably successful, many—not so much. Oh, certainly, there were things to be learned and we were jolted out of our complacency with “things as they have always been,” but perhaps, just perhaps, it wouldn’t be the best thing to let go of all that had made us who we are. Maybe, just maybe, we need to get in touch with our roots, figure out what and who we are called to be in this time and place.

Well, today, one of the parents of the mega churches, Willow Creek, is retooling. It has achieved stupendous growth and influence, touched many, many lives. But with all that “success” they have stated publicly that they missed the mark, their original goal. Of making disciples of those seekers. I admire them for being so open. And for sharing what they have learned.

At the same time, the generations have changed again. The “entertainment style” worship is no longer new—to the younger folk, it is their parents’ worship. We have new challenges today--the “nones,” the “spiritual but not religious.” They are still suspicious of the institutional church, but studies are showing that they have a new interest in a sense of mystery and beauty in worship. They seek community where they can belong—though they might never “join” in our traditional sense of being members—a community where they can make sense and meaning of a confusing and complex world. And, they want authenticity—do people just come to church on Sunday mornings, go through the motions and go back to their Monday through Saturday lives unchanged, or do they live out their faith 24/7?

They don’t care about BIG. They care about REAL.

Jesus told the disciples that only a tiny speck of faith was needed and they already had it. Their thinking was all wrong. Faith is not a commodity to be measured. What, then, is faith? What did Jesus mean?

In our world today, a world of scientific advancement and knowledge, we have drifted toward faith and belief as intellectual assents, agreements with doctrine. This is faith as head stuff and not what Jesus meant. It is not even biblical. Faith is of the heart. Faith is relational, it's about following Jesus. Faith is about what and with whom you put your trust. Do we trust in wealth, power, fame and such or do we trust in one another and in the love and goodness of the God who made us?

If we don't have to worry about "growing" our faith, we can simply see the faith we have been given, recognize it, accept that it is there, and use it.

Yesterday, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America installed a new presiding bishop. She was interviewed as to what she would do about the decline in members. She said:

I don't know if we're going to be packing the pews, but that's not our goal. Our goal is to give people a sense of a God who loves us so much that He'd rather die than lose a single one of us. And prayer would probably be good since it's God's church and not ours. Maybe we should listen to the boss.

As individuals and as churches, we already have all that we need. We have the "goods" for today and tomorrow. Together we have deep roots, intertwined though separate. Together we have tradition and history that informs our lives and connects us with each other and with the whole cloud of witnesses through time. Yet we know that we must not be static or stuck in the past. We must discern what in our tradition can enliven and revitalize our churches and move forward with those. For our God is a living God who acts and speaks through all generations and circumstances. And we, as disciples can do—can be—no less.

Thanks be to God. Amen.