

**A MUSTARD SEEDLING VS. AN AVALANCHE OF DISTRUST; LUKE 17:1-10;
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY, 10.2.16; THOMAS H. YORTY; WPC/FPC**

John Darby, a leader here at First, launched the idea of this day months ago. I saw him in the neighborhood one day last spring and he suggested an exchange of worship services. "You know," he said, "like home and away football games."

"Great idea," I replied, "But will we need referees? People to make sure the sermons are not, unlike Tom Brady's footballs, *over-inflated*?"

Seriously, when John offered the idea it carried all the weight of 'this is the right thing to do and now is the right time to do it.' "No agenda," he said. "A simple get together at our place and yours." "Perfect," I responded, and wondered why we hadn't gotten around to it before?

The Holy Spirit has a way of making things happen. Who knows why we haven't entertained a joint worship experience until now; maybe it doesn't matter. The Buddha said, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears."

It is after all World Communion Sunday – the one day in the year when a third of the world's population who call themselves Christian commit to celebrating the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper and not let our different interpretations of the bread and wine keep us from gathering at the table.

There is no small irony that the very sacrament that celebrates the pioneer and perfecter of our faith laying down his life to break through all the barriers we erect that keep us apart, was, itself, the very thing over which wars were fought during the Reformation; and is the very thing that *still divides* vast portions of his church today.

And there is a bit of irony if not curiosity in the fact that our two congregations have not shared this meal together in either of our long and distinguished histories.

But today changes all that. Today marks the occasion when First and Westminster Presbyterian Churches are planting a mustard seed of faith, a mustard seed of trust that the God who made us – and calls all of his children to be one in Christ – is bigger than anything that not only keeps us apart but keeps us from working together in harmony for the well-being of this city.

In fact, that seed was planted when your Elders wrote a letter of invitation to our Elders to be here today and when our Elders gratefully accepted and wrote a letter inviting you, First Church, to worship with us at Westminster in December. What is breaking through this fallow field of Presbyterianism is a mustard seedling of trust – its tiny stem sprouting in the sunshine of your welcome this morning; its tender greenish leaves opening up in the warmth of your hospitality; and new relationships taking root in tendrils of trust reaching into the rich, loamy common ground we share as Presbyterian neighbors in this city; common ground and a common ministry given expression by our ancestors to fulfill the great commandment to love God and serve our neighbor. John was absolutely right it is high time we get to know each other and have each other over for dinner.

I have found, over the years, that the lectionary has a way of serving up just the right Scripture the body of Christ needs at any given time, in any given circumstance.

It is fitting that the lesson today is a teaching moment between Jesus and his disciples. As he makes his way to Jerusalem and fends off the angry interrogations of the religious leaders, he takes this moment to give his followers guidelines for their life together in the community of faith. Maybe he heard them bickering or gossiping about one another. Something compelled him to set them straight; and given the fracturing of the church past and present, World Communion Sunday is a good Sunday to remember what Jesus said it takes to make Christian community work.

Of all the things Jesus calls his disciples to do, when he asks them to be a loving, compassionate, nurturing community of believers they recoil in trepidation and demand that he increase their faith.

It's also possible that his message of forgiveness and the way of the cross is finally sinking in. And a good place to look first at what difference it makes in their lives is how they treat each other. Some of the worst battles and fights are with those closest to us in families and churches. So Jesus comments on two kinds of occasions: when we find ourselves 'sinned against' and when we 'sin against others.'

Sinned against: Jesus says if someone offends you seven times in the same day but repents each time, you are to forgive that person. We might conclude, that more forgiveness was needed in the early church. Of course, only the person offended can forgive when he or she is ready but the point of Jesus' instruction is don't hold out; forgive one another as God has forgiven you,

Sin against others: Jesus says we are responsible for the well-being of one another. If our conduct causes one of these little ones to stumble it would be better if a millstone were tied around our necks and we were thrown into the sea. 'Little ones' could mean children or those new to the faith. Imagine yourself with a little one in the back-seat of your car watching how you handle the guy who cuts in front of you; or standing by your side as you negotiate a business deal. When children act out, or when they are models of courtesy we say they 'learned that at home.' I'll bet most of us have a mentor from when we were new to the faith who *still inspires* our conduct and behavior.

Jesus is raising the bar; he's saying the fellowship of believers is different from other groups we belong to. The church grows not through persuasion but attraction. People are hungry for caring, loving community; for healthy, trusting relationships.

Yet, we've all heard stories and even experienced times when the church has fallen short of being the church Jesus envisions.

A recent survey identifies one of the largest groups in the category of those who are religiously unaffiliated – which is the fastest growing group in America because organized religion is losing so many people so fast and not replacing them – one of the main reasons people leave the church and don't come back is because of the painful experiences, mis-treatment and hard-ball politics that go on in the body of Christ.ⁱ

And this may be why the disciples are getting cold feet, they need help to forgive more readily and live more kindly. And they equate this with a lack of faith. "Say something, do something Jesus that will quadruple our faith!"

But Jesus flips their request on its head and tells them that if they had faith even the size of a mustard seed it would be enough to enable them to accomplish things far greater than he is asking. The Greek if/then phrase here is not a reprimand for lack of faith but an affirmation of the faith they have.

He says with the faith they have they could uproot a mulberry tree and plant it in the sea – an absurd, impossible thing – what he means is even a little faith *removes* 'absurd' and 'impossible' from our vocabulary when it comes to what God asks us to do. Anything's possible.

But then he gives a practical analogy; he talks about the servant who works in the field during the day and comes into the house to prepare the master's dinner at night; he asks would the master tell the servant at the end of the day, "sit down, and let me prepare a meal for you?" No. The servant prepares and serves the master.

This parable is about the *role* of the servant. Faith is more like dutiful service to the master, rather than highly skilled, heroic self-sacrifice or brilliant theological rumination.

Jesus might have used himself as the illustration; he is the servant leader those disciples were following; indeed, he does make himself the example when they get to Jerusalem – he kneels down and washes their feet. Jesus reminds us today that faith is not a matter of quantity (you need only a little to be faithful); and faithfulness is often a simple, everyday matter of doing our duty.

It's easy for leaders in the church or members of a church, to forget that we are servants of a servant God.

In the age of Facebook and Instagram it's easy to think it's all about me, who I am and what I want; and then it's a short step to reversing my role with God; to take it too far like Adam and Eve; to let the shiny catalogues, consumer culture and upscale living lure me away when the serpent asks, "Why stop there? Surely you want more, you don't have enough do you?"

Or we think *Jesus* is the giver – washing feet, healing, comforting. It's what we expect of him. The old catechism question, "What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever" becomes the chief end of Jesus – to glorify and enjoy *me* forever. This is C.S. Lewis' God as cosmic bellhop. You can imagine life in a church where the roles master and servant are reversed. It is, says Robert Jones in his new book *The End of White Christian America*, the church we thought we were. Jones does not discount the remarkable accomplishments and mission achieved by the progressive white and evangelical Protestant churches but he does acknowledge how we considered ourselves at our start in North America as 'chosen' by God and how we thought of our prosperity, race and socio-economic power were God's blessing for our hard work and piety.

So that when the demographics shift, as Jones says they clearly have, the great opportunity, indeed, the one hope for any renewal in traditionally white, progressive or evangelical Protestant churches is to embrace our role as servants to humanity – as partners and allies to a racially and religiously diverse nation.

It was true when Martin Luther said it and it is still true when we can practice it:

to serve God with no expectations, no pre-determined outcomes but as willing, loving servants letting the Holy Spirit shape our days and guide our ministry is to be truly free.

We are living in a remarkable time – the current Presidential campaign is a fascinating, if concerning snapshot of American culture. We have morphed from a bi-partisan political system in which policies were debated and forged by compromise to identity politics, personal attacks and no tolerance for the other side.

We are suffering, one op-ed writer says, from an ‘avalanche of distrust.’ Political candidates of both parties reflect a stark, combative, zero-sum view of life. One side says you can’t trust immigrants or Muslims, the other side says you can’t trust the so-called ‘basket of deplorables.’ⁱⁱ

And yet members of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C. felt that even the man who murdered their close friends was redeemable, and they forgave him.

That’s what’s different about followers of Jesus, that’s what’s different about Christian community.

They’ll know we are Christians by our love isn’t just a feel good song; it is a call to arms in these times when the forces of darkness would have us think we can’t get along, when we are invited to believe that those who disagree with our religion or politics are unredeemable.

But even in the midst of an avalanche of distrust somebody’s got to greet distrust with vulnerability, someone has to meet skepticism with innocence, somebody’s to engage cynicism with faith, and someone has to confront hostility with affection.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some may consider that to be absurd or impossible in the present climate; but for those who call themselves servants of Jesus it’s just, well, doing our duty.

In another version of the parable Jesus talks about how the mustard seed grows into a great bush that gives shelter to all the birds of the air and shade to those who lie under it. Shelter and shade.

The times couldn’t be better to be planting mustard seeds and watching them grow. Amen.

ⁱ Robert Jones, “Why White Americans are Leaving Organized Religion and Why They Are Unlikely To Come Back,” September 30, 2016, online report, Public Religion Research Institute.

ⁱⁱ David Brooks, "The Avalanche Of Distrust," *New York Times*, September 13, 2016 A27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brooks, A27.