

MOVING MULBERRY TREES
II Timothy 1: 1-7, 13-14; Luke 17: 5-10
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by Pat Berger

We might ask the same thing of Jesus that his disciples did that day: increase our faith! And especially we might have asked the same thing if we had been in Jesus' presence that day: increase our faith! He had just told them that faith-stumbling opportunities existed, and that it would not go well for them if they were the ones who caused anyone to stumble; it would be better if a millstone were hung around one's neck and he were thrown into the sea! And if one were sinned against seven times in one day and forgiveness were asked seven times, that was how often forgiveness needed to be given. Oh my goodness: please increase our faith!

And about here, can you imagine that Jesus was rolling his divine eyes, and he said to them, basically, "You have plenty of faith." We just heard from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus saying to his disciples, "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.'" Each one of us has a mustard seed in our bulletins this morning. You may have known the size of a mustard seed; now you have one to look at. My guess is that, even when we think we don't have enough faith, we would know that we had more than the size of that mustard seed. Likely we won't be needing to move mulberry trees, period; much less, plant them into the sea. Still, there may be days when we think that what is being asked of us is that large of a task. And here is Jesus, telling his disciples that they could do that, or whatever it is that God is asking of us on a given day, because that is how much faith we have been given.

The word that is used for faith here translates better as "loyalty" or "reliability." Jesus saw his task as bringing Israel back to God's way, and those who worked with him would need to be loyal to this project; he would need to be able to count on them. They might not actually

need to uproot mulberry trees and plant them in the sea – and yet, some days their tasks might have seemed just as improbable.

And some days, so do ours. Think about headlines that have claimed our attentions this week. There have been shootings. There is confusion in Washington, D. C. and around our country. Things in the Middle East and in Ukraine seem not to be able to be calmed. Increase our faith! And that of others, everywhere! We wonder what might be asked of us, how we might be able to be helpful in any of these situations. Likely, we won't be asked to play major parts in any huge situation. And yet: we ask ourselves, what can I do? How might I be involved in helping?

Especially on this World Communion Sunday, we are conscious of how the people of Christ everywhere are asking themselves these questions. We say in our communion prayer, "By the baptism of Jesus death, suffering and resurrection, you (God) gave birth to your church in your whole world." And those of us who are the church today wonder and ask in prayer, how can we be helpful?

We hear every Sunday of family members, friends at church and in the community who are in need of our prayers, and we include them in our prayer, and our prayer makes a difference. Some of those prayers seem as if helping would be quite like moving a mulberry tree. And yet we can do remarkable things because God needs to have them done, God chooses one of us or some of us to do them, and helps us to make them happen. It may require more than attending worship regularly and generally doing our best; we know that. And it requires that, too. David Lose wrote that it never occurs to most of us, "... that being a good friend, or working at jobs to keep food on the table or to keep the world running, or paying your taxes . . . , or any of the other ordinary stuff we do every day has anything to do with our Christian faith." It does.

One example in our church is the work that our Deacons do. My favorite example of that is the phone calls that our Deacons make every month. Each of you is on one Deacon's list, and they call their

people. Now, I have been in churches where reports of those calls are like, "Tim is fine, Ann is fine, Joe wasn't home." Not at Plymouth! A good bit of every meeting is spent with each Deacon making in depth reports of phone calls made or visits had after worship with those on their list.

And today, about half of our congregation and our pastor are at the Warm Springs Presbyterian Church, leading and participating in Worldwide Communion Sunday worship there! That church is a mission church of our Presbytery, which means that everyone in our Presbytery is a member of that church. Right now, as you may know, it is without a pastor and counts on either fill-in pastors or congregations that are willing to send their pastor or maybe pastor and part or all of their members to worship with them on a Sunday. Plymouth is now one of several churches in our Presbytery to do this. Oh, and they took communion elements and coffee hour refreshments with them, too! We hope they had safe journeys going and will have safe journeys returning, and we are anxious to hear their stories. They also took with them drinking water, which is still needed, and the check from donations you made during coffee hour last week plus \$100 from the Deacons – the total was \$175! They will be most grateful.

As I close, let's remember part of what Gina read for us this morning from I Timothy:

"I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline."

Let us pray.