

**Sermon: October 2, 2016      Luke 17:5-10 Worldwide Communion Sunday**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

Today is Worldwide Communion Sunday. It is also the Sunday when we encounter Luke's curious words about faith the size of a mustard seed. With my warped sense of reality, at the end of a very eventful week, I looked at these two rather unconnected worship elements a little bit cross-eyed and thought, "we could have a Worldwide Mustard Sunday." We could have a variety of mustards, cook some hot dogs, and see if the Blue Jays have it in them to win one more game to solidify their place in the playoffs.

While we're not going to do *that*, I am going to let the tiny mustard seed assert its full power and guide us to three learnings about Christian Discipleship.

I.      Is faith the size of a mustard-seed really sufficient?

Charles Price, preacher at Toronto's *People's Church*, recounts his first time on an airplane. He was heading from the UK to a newly-accepted position in Africa, and he was pretty apprehensive about the journey ahead of him. In the seat beside him was an older Scottish lady who was gripping the arm rests with both hands. Like him, she had never flown before, and she was terrified. If not for the fact that her grandchildren in Africa needed her, she would have happily gone through the rest of her life never having flown in an aircraft; but they *did* need her, and here she was. On the other side of Charles was a businessman who had flown hundreds of times before. He settled into his seat, put his attaché case under the seat in front of him, lightly fastened his seatbelt, and casually started to read the newspaper.

In order to get on that airplane, Charles related, each of them needed to have sufficient trust that the aircraft was sound and that the pilot's experience and ability would get them safely to their destination. The terrified Scottish lady indeed only had "faith the size of a mustard seed" – basically believing that there was a 51% chance that she would not die on this flight. By comparison to her faith the size of a mustard seed, Charles had faith the size of, say, a potato; and the business traveler beside him had faith the size of a watermelon.

All three of these travelers arrived safely at the airport in Kinshasa, all at the same time. Their faith or lack of faith in the ability of the pilot and flight-worthiness of the plane hadn't impacted how quickly they arrived. But the amount of confidence and trust each of them had greatly impacted the quality of their trip. While the experienced traveler relaxed, enjoyed his meals, read a bit and napped when he felt like it, young Charles got through it but never "relaxed"; and the poor terrified woman remained in the grip of fear the entire journey, enjoyed none of it, and the half-of-one-meal that she attempted to eat didn't stay down for long. The more trust they had – with trust and faith being more or less synonymous - the more they got out of it.

In today's reading from Luke, the disciples asked Jesus to give them more faith. That may not strike us as a strange request, but Lutheran Bible Commentator Brian Stoffregen reminds us that these are the same disciples who had already travelled the countryside in Jesus' name, teaching people of his new way, baptizing them into the family of faith, healing them of infirmities of the body, mind and spirit. From our vantage point these were experts in the realm of faith. But they thirsted for something even more: a desire that each action of their lives would be express the expansiveness of God's welcoming love. And perhaps they also thirsted for what Charles Price talks about: a deeper embrace of this journey we call life, as needless anxieties are replaced by a full-on trust, that the way of love is the only way to go.

Jesus held up a mustard seed, the tiniest seed planted in his culture, (1mm–2mm in diameter) and said "this much faith" is all we need to move forward in life - and there have been times in my life when I have been very, very thankful that Jesus set the threshold so low. As Charles Price related, nobody gets "more saved" by having more faith, but chances are pretty good that if you can release whatever is blocking you from really letting Christ's love shape your life, you're going to enjoy the ride quite a bit more.

II.      How the strength of this tiny seed gets unlocked.

In the gospel of Matthew (17:20), we're told that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. Here in Luke the image is a bit less showy, but still a good-sized tree – Mulberry or Sycamore, depending on the translation – uproots itself and leaps into the sea by the power of this tiny, mustard seed sized faith. Both readings use hyperbole to make their point, and whether it's a mountain or a tree that's being

moved, the point is the same: if we can trust the loving, transforming power of God, even the smallest, tiniest amount, we will open our lives to possibilities that may sound ridiculous to even consider.

Brian Stoffregen relates an old prayer that said, “God, I don’t pray for enough faith to move mountains - I can get enough dynamite and bulldozers to do that. What I need and ask for is enough faith to move me.” Or to put it another way, “Perhaps moving mulberry trees (or mountains) into the sea is an easier act of faith than moving us to...forgive people who have sinned against us.” And when I read these thoughts by Pastor Stoffregen it dawned on me, that the tiny size of the mustard seed is kind of immaterial, compared to its level of commitment to the task at hand. For the seed, there is no choice but to be “all in” on the task of growth: once it goes into the ground and germinates it gives up its life as a seed. The seed casing bursts, and a plant emerges that gradually grows to be thousands of times bigger than the seed. Only when the life of the mustard seed ends, can the life of the mustard plant begin.

Chapter 5 of the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous includes the wise words: “half measures availed us nothing” and that’s the point here, as well. If we choose, we have access to the wisdom of Christ, his promise of life, the truth of holy love, the divine power of full forgiveness, and it’s up to us to decide whether these gifts are going to be central to our life or merely peripheral. The choice is ours, in big life-shaping ways, and in tiny day-changing ways; and the metaphor is clear: there is no such thing as a seed that is mostly busy doing other things, while doing a bit of growing on the side. Either it’s fully invested in the process of growth, or it’s not growing at all – there’s no “part-way” in this particular metaphor. And when it does go “all in,” even a tiny seed of faith can produce a substantial yield.

### III. The mustard seed points us to global understandings

Mustard rivals pepper as the most popular and widespread seasoning in the world. It has been popular for a long time in a lot of different countries. It first showed up in cooking some 2,200 years ago in China and is still used everywhere from the UK to India, from Denmark to North Africa. Mustard is found on tables everywhere in the world and in many different formulations, often mixing ingredients from different continents, like Dijon mustard which is typically made of French wine plus Canadian mustard seed. That combination of something that is ancient, varied and widespread, where elements from different nations intermingle, strikes me as a pretty good simile for the Church.

So what about the Church, and how widespread it is in the world? I have a question for you: where do you think the geographic centre of Christianity might be these days? That is, if you could place each Sunday worshipper on a map of the world, where would the balance point be? Church attendance has really dropped in Canada and in Northern Europe in recent decades, but the numbers are still pretty good in the USA, and the Church is tremendously strong in Latin America, so maybe the centre is somewhere around Mexico City, or a bit south of there? But then again, there are places like Spain and Italy, and the Philippines, where there are lots of Christians... maybe the centre is on the other side of the Atlantic, around its traditional home in Rome? In answer to this question, *The Economist* magazine did a study in December 2015, and determined that the current geographic centre of Christianity is (drum roll please) Niamey, the capital of the African nation of Niger. And I have to say, I am surprised.

Whenever I hear of Canadian Churches having their energies consumed by local tempests-in-teapots, this map snaps me back to my senses. Christian leaders in North America and Europe still have significant influence in the Christian world, and there are hotbeds like Latin America and the Philippines where Church involvement has been strong for a long time and remains so, but the place where Christian participation is flourishing is the continent of Africa.

Comparing the years 1910 and 2010, in 1910 9% of Africans were Christian; in 2010, 48%. The stats are even more remarkable on a regional basis: Middle Africa (the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its neighbours) has gone from 1% Christian in 1910, to 83% in 2010.

While I realize that the history of the African Church has been marred by many of the regrettable practices seen in colonial Christianity elsewhere in the world, most of the growth in the African Church has happened in post-colonial times, so there is something new and local going on there. My sense is that Africans are stripping away the European trappings that travelled with Christianity for so long, and when they strip off all that junk they find Jesus, the one who calls women and orphans and migrants and slaves to a life of reconciliation, love, and life in abundance. In spite of the dangers of taking up the call of Christ – as witnessed by the horrific kidnappings by the Boko Haram in NE Nigeria – scores of Africans

are finding meaning in the words of one who said, “even if your faith is tiny like a mustard seed, God has gifted you with immense potential for good”. While I cannot pretend that all is well in the Christian Church in Africa – and our prayers are with the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo even today, as civil unrest rises - I do want to flag how significant the voice of Africa is going to be in shaping the future of Christianity in the world.

On this Worldwide communion Sunday, our call to the Table reminds us that all are welcome: whether your faith is the size of a mustard seed or a potato or a watermelon, or even if you have lost your faith altogether, but would like to find it again. At the table, Christ speaks to us of what it meant for him to be broken by the world, what it means for his life to flow through the life of the Church, how growth begins with a willingness to let ourselves be broken apart, like seeds sprouting forth in new green shoots. At today’s table, we acknowledge that our family of faith is truly global, with new voices enlivened by the love of Jesus Christ. At table, we come together as one: one with Christ, and one with the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.

References cited:

Alcoholics Anonymous. [http://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_bigbook\\_chapt5.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_bigbook_chapt5.pdf)

The Economist. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/12/daily-chart-4>

Mother Earth Living (on the topic of mustard):

<http://www.motherearthliving.com/plant-profile/the-amazing-mustard-seed>

Price, Charles. <http://www.livingtruth.ca/LT/charles.asp>

Sanneh, Lamin and McClymond, Michael (eds). *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. pp.702-209.

Stoffregen, Brian. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke17x5.htm>

© 2016 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.