



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

The Way: Faith

October 6, 2019

Text: Luke 17: 5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ The Lord replied, ‘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. ‘Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, “Come here at once and take your place at the table”? Would you not rather say to him, “Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink”? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!” ’



Sermon:

It is an iconic scene in Peter Jackson’s adaptation of Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Ring*. In the scene there is a small gathering of intrepid souls, seeking counsel as to how they might take on a great and impossibly powerful evil. In the midst of that small group of people looking into each other’s eyes, they somehow acknowledge the enormity of their challenge—a challenge that would make any sane, rational person—any normal person just turn around and walk away. But in that moment, the smallest in the group—the ‘mustard seed’ of the bunch, the little hobbit named Frodo steps forth and claims that with their help, he will bear the greatest burden. In that remarkable and impossible act, hope is found; courage is stoked, and they set out to the swelling of great music to do the unlikely. No, they set out to do the improbable. To be fair, they set out on a fool’s errand of the impossible. It’s somewhat akin to standing next to a full-grown mulberry tree, with roots gnarled deep into the earth, and saying, ‘Get up and take yourself to the sea,’ and then watching it happen.

But you see, their hearts had been stirred; their consciousness was awakened, and they knew they had no choice but to set forth. Off they went with a bounce in their step, confidence on their faces, while the music was rising louder and louder; that is, until they came to the very first fork in the road. The very first choice that this intrepid band must make was when the smallest among them—little Frodo—whispered to the wisest of them—“I have no idea which way to go.” So soon into their adventure—so quickly having set out with courage and conviction that they could do the impossible, they ran into the enormity of their task. For, despite the grandeur of the calling, the outcome of such things always hinges in the balance of the little choices we make along the way—choices that end up defining our way.

This Sunday we begin our stewardship campaign. On the front cover of your bulletin you will notice that there is a path laid out between the grass and the first of our choices is before us. We need to decide which way to go. There are choices at different crossroads that define our journey and often at impossible odds in the world we currently find ourselves in. In stewardship, we ask you to consider choices that have to do with things that are precious to each of us. We ask you to make hard choices about what you will do with your time. We ask you to make hard choices about how you will put your talent to work, and we ask you to make hard choices about where to put your treasure. For where your treasure is, Jesus tells us, there your heart will be also. And so at the beginning of the beginning of this reading and this journey, we have a core ingredient to consider, and that is this idea of faith. Faith defines both how we walk and how we give, both about the choices big or small, and I have come to know that there are some words that we use all the time in church, and yet we don't spend much time thinking about what they actually mean, convinced that the person sitting next to us knows more than we do—or the person across the aisle does far better at it than we do and so it's better to just keep quiet about it.

This word faith is replete in the New Testament; in fact, it shows up in all but two of the 27 writings in the New Testament, and often well more than once. 'Increase our faith' is what the disciples are begging Jesus to do—increase our faith. And of course then comes Jesus' answer—'If you had faith even the size of a mustard seed—the smallest of seeds in the world—all you would have to do is say to that tree, 'Move,' and it would move. And suddenly that same seed seems to get squished beneath a heel, because if any of you have ever moved a mulberry tree by asking it to walk across the lawn, let me know, and I know all of the landscapers in this room would like to know your secret too. It becomes daunting because it seems impossible—how this smallest of things can have impact on the biggest of things. That word faith is at the center and the heart of any journey we take as a people, but yet I find that more often than not, it is a word that can end up freezing us in our tracks rather than allowing us to live into its true meaning. Its meaning, by the way, is filled with motion, emotion, movement and direction.

If you think about the New Testament, then no one talks about faith more than Paul. Paul believes that this mysterious thing called faith actually allows us to be in full relationship with God. It bridges the gap between us and God so that we may encounter God in the fullness of God's self, not as some abstract copy and certainly not in the recesses of our mind. In the Book of Hebrews, an early sermon written about what faith is and why it matters, it says that our whole lives are simply part of the story of faith unfolding. Hebrews reminds us that it was by faith that Abel brought his gifts to God. It was by faith that Enoch walked in the way of the Lord; it was by faith that Noah built that ark in the middle of dry land amidst the derision of everyone who was watching. It was by faith that Abraham set out, and it ends by asking us to point our eyes and hearts directly at Jesus—the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.

So, what is this thing called faith? It's probably not what you think, and what you think of faith is probably part of a very new tradition within the Christian movement. Only recently in our enlightened and scientific era have we picked up new baggage for this concept of faith. We have taken this thing of movement and motion, of trusting and becoming, and we have confined it up here (in our heads). Trusting in a Latin word that describes something to assent

to, an opinion—a conviction. It seems so logical but it has the effect of making this idea of faith, which is supposed to be life giving instead into some kind of a test. And ironically, it diminishes its impact and possibility.

Instead, both in stewardship and in faith, I want you to think about the much older—the much more timeworn and lively meaning of that word, for you see, it is a thing of heart, of motion and of possibility. Soren Kierkegaard gives us a good place to start; this giant thinker said that faith is “like floating in 70,000 fathoms of water.” Do you know how deep that is? Soren says you shouldn’t think about it, because the more you think about it, the more you will thrash about in that water and the quicker you will sink to the bottom of it all. But if you trust, if you relax, if you open up heart and mind, no matter how much is beneath you, you will float

Has anyone here ever taught a small child how to swim? I don’t know about your kid, but this is what I’ll tell you about my kid. I give thanks in many ways that Jakey is a risk-averse child; it made the first few years of our lives much easier, and yet, trying to get him to swim, even to approach that water when he couldn’t see his toes on the bottom, and didn’t know how deep it was—was a matter of terror for him. It wasn’t until we could take him in our arms, cuddle with him, and convince him that we had him fully supported that he suddenly began to simply float. And then of course it doesn’t hurt that for parents’ peace of mind or Jakey’s that they’ve invented those wonderful floaty things. For fear is one of our biggest obstacles to faith, because when we have fear, we thrash around. When we take our eyes off of God and look instead at the world, we become convinced of how small we are and how big the world is. And yet, if we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we move forward. Do you remember the story about Peter in the boat with Jesus? Remember how Peter walks out on the water to go meet with Jesus. He is the one bold enough to get out of the boat with faith enough to make him walk, and do you remember the moment when he started sinking? It’s when he took his eyes off of Jesus and saw how illogical was the place where he was standing. And so Peter did what people do; he sank.

But faith is more than simply opening u and trusting; faith is also a notion of fidelity. Think about being faithful to someone. Although the Bible says, ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery,’ but I wonder how much more profound it would have been if instead it had said, ‘Thou shalt be faithful to your spouse,’ because it is not just the act of straying that is unfaithful. To be faithful means that you actively love that person—that you actively support that person, and that you actively care about what they care about. So when we are faithful to God, the idea of having faith means caring about what God cares about—what God loves, which is mainly to love thy neighbor and even all of creation. It means to live in a way that responds to the calling, just like that intrepid group who set out to do what was right

But finally, if you look at the oldest definitions of that word faith, in it is this idea of vision and purpose and direction. Faith doesn’t just propel us; it continues to guide us. Through trust and action it is a force in the Bible that animates us. What they had set out to do was completely impossible and yet their faith would not let go of them because they could not let go of that vision of peace—that vision we sang about in the opening hymn and that called us into worship—that vision we practice by shaking hands with each other. The destination compelled them forward in that journey.

If you ever have any questions about the Bible, please give me a call. I'd be delighted to talk to you about it. But if not, go on the web. I know I said that, and it sounds dangerous if not crazy, but here's the place to go. Go to the **Bible Project** online. They will answer any questions that you have. If you inquire about this whole endeavor called a 'Gospel' in the Bible project and about this whole message of Jesus; they will tell you that Jesus' whole message, his whole purpose and meaning was to turn the world upside down. I would quibble with them a bit; I actually don't think Jesus wanted to turn the whole world upside down; we had already turned it upside down. Instead, Jesus wanted us to see it for what it is—a world where neighbor loves each other as they love themselves—a world where everyone is equal—and a world in which we recognize that every single person is the Beloved of God with the very essence of God in them.

That good news, that truth is at the heart of this passage—even with its difficult message of slaves and banquets—that we turn the world right side up, that we see clearly what God loves and that we act and trust that we simply float. That word slave probably jumped out at many of you in this passage; it's a difficult word. But Paul clarifying it by claiming that we are all slaves to but one true master—that we are slaves to God. That when we claim that it is also a claim that God gives us the freedom in that relationship to be able to act and do and live as we want. Not some limited freedom, but ultimate freedom. It's not just Paul who says it; Jonathan Edward's most famous book, *The Freedom of the Will*, talks about what is at stake and likewise proclaims our freedom through our ties to God. Paul uses that language of slavery to turn things upside down.

I think the question here is that we read this passage about being out for a long day at work, and of course we want to come home and have someone else take care of us; that's the way we've been taught that the world works but this passage will have none of that and instead turns it upside down. And it does it in the exact model of this Communion table right here. It directs our gaze to God; 'Eat and drink' the passage says. It adds, 'Should slaves seek accolades?' That's what the world tells us, but it is not what God tells us because we have all been hard at work, but coming into this room—instead of serving God, instead of putting this meal on some high altar that only glorifies God, this table is set out in our presence that we might join God in God's very presence right here at this table. The message in Luke's challenging parable is to turn our world upside down and if we had faith to really trust in what God wants, the beauty of peace, and the goodness of relationship would thrive and we would set out on a journey to welcome everyone to this table, whether they look like us, act like us, talk like us, vote like us, smell like us, or love like us. So when you get to that crossroads, friends, feel free just like Frodo did, to stop for a moment before making a choice, go silent, and then whisper something to the wisest presence in the whole world—to the Holy Spirit, and say, 'I don't know which way to go; you guide me.'

Amen



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor