

**Faith Like a Mustard Seed**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, October 2, 2016  
The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
*Luke 17:5-10*

If I were making a list of all the things I wish Jesus had never said, this saying about having faith the size of a mustard seed would be near the top. Not because it's so bad, or so hard, but because it makes people think of faith as a *quantity*, as something you can have more or less of. Usually people assume they have less and wish they had more. If they had more they could move mountains, right? And sometimes there are mountains to be moved. In today's passage the disciples beg Jesus, "Lord, increase our faith!" but he says to them: "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." And I don't know that I've heard it this way before but when I read that passage this time around it almost sounded as if Jesus were saying, "Increase your faith? You don't need *more* faith. You only need the tiniest little speck. No, it's not about having more faith, it's about putting your faith in the right place, or more specifically, in the right person."

And that's what I want to talk about today.

In a book called *The Heart of Christianity* New Testament scholar Marcus Borg devotes an entire chapter to faith.<sup>1</sup> He claims that in Western Christianity (that is, in our kind of Christianity) *faith* has come to mean holding a certain set of "beliefs," or "believing" a set of statements to be true. For most people, being a Christian means believing that there is a God, believing that the Bible is the revelation of God, and believing that Jesus is the Son of God, and that he died for our sins. Borg (who grew up Lutheran in North Dakota) acknowledges that "for some Christians the list would be longer: believing that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God; believing in Genesis rather than evolution; believing that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he walked on water, that he raised the dead, that he himself was raised from the dead in a physical bodily form, and that he will come again someday. Sometimes the beliefs become very specific, Borg writes: believing in infant baptism instead of adult baptism (or vice versa); believing in "the Rapture"; believing (or not believing) in purgatory. The list goes on and on, but as

you have probably experienced for yourself believing “the right things” is very important to Christians.

But here’s the problem:

All this emphasis on belief can quickly turn faith into a matter of the head rather than the heart. And Marcus Borg would insist that it *has* happened rather quickly. Back in the Middle Ages the word *orthodoxy* meant “right worship”; in fact, that is the literal meaning of the word. But during the Protestant Reformation it came to mean “right belief,” partly because all those Baptists, and Methodists, and Presbyterians were still figuring out what they believed. Should we baptize infants or adults? Is communion a sacrament or an ordinance? And then there was this other thing, the Enlightenment, that changed the way we understood truth. In the Middle Ages no one questioned the story of Jonah and the Whale. It was in the Bible: of course it was true! But during the Enlightenment people began to ask: Could there really be a fish big enough to swallow a man? And could a man really live after three days in its belly? The only truth that counted was that which could be verified scientifically; in other words, *truth* was replaced with *fact* (which is a much smaller word).

And so, after being run through the wringer of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, faith has come to mean believing the right things, and believing them no matter what, even if they are not scientifically verifiable. But it was not always so. Marcus Borg helps us by looking back to the Middle Ages, and four different Latin words for *faith* (and let me just say, if you are one of those people who likes to take notes, this would be a good time to do it).

1. The first word is *assensus*, from which we get the English word *assent*, and it means pretty much what you would expect it to mean: giving one’s mental assent to a claim or proposition, that is, *believing* that it is true. The opposite of this kind of faith is “doubt” in its milder form and “disbelief” in its stronger form. For example: you might go from doubting that a fish could swallow a man to disbelieving it altogether. Marcus Borg says that when he was a teenager he had those kinds of doubts and prayed, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!” Since then he has wondered, “Is this really what God wants from us: our mental assent to a long list of theological propositions? Our heads rather than our hearts?” He

- also notes that you can believe all the right things and still be in bondage, still be miserable, still be unchanged—that faith as *assensus* doesn't have much transformative power. And yet there are some things we can and should affirm. At the bare minimum being Christian means a) affirming the reality of God, b) the utter centrality of Jesus, and c) the centrality of the Bible.
2. The second Latin word for faith is *fiducia*, and the closest English equivalent is *fiduciary*, which may mean something to the bankers and lawyers out there, but doesn't mean much to me. A better word would be *trust*, or “radical trust.” *Fiducia* is like floating in an ocean of God's grace.<sup>ii</sup> Borg says that once, when his wife was teaching an adult Sunday school class, she asked if anyone had ever tried to teach a child to swim. Several hands went up. She asked, “What was the hardest thing about it?” And they all agreed: getting the child to relax and float, to trust the buoyancy of the water. *Fiducia* is learning to trust the buoyancy of God, and the opposite of this kind of faith is not doubt but anxiety, or worry. In the middle of that storm on the Sea of Galilee, when they were afraid their boat was going to sink, Jesus asked his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Where is your faith?” A few chapters later he says, “If God so clothes the grass of the field, will he not clothe you, you of little faith?” In both cases he is talking about faith as *fiducia*: radical trust.
  3. The third Latin word is *fidelitas*, which can be translated as *fidelity*, or *faithfulness*, specifically, faithfulness in our relationship to God. It means what faithfulness does in a marriage—being faithful to God in the same way you might be faithful to a spouse. The opposite of this kind of faith is not doubt or disbelief, but unfaithfulness or adultery. Another biblical word for this kind of unfaithfulness is idolatry—giving one's ultimate loyalty and allegiance to something other than God. Borg says, “As the opposite of idolatry, [this kind of] faith means being loyal to God and not to the many would-be gods that present themselves to us. Christian faith means loyalty to Jesus as Lord, and not to the seductive would-be lords of our lives, whether the nation, or affluence, or achievement, or family, or desire.”<sup>iii</sup>

4. The fourth Latin word for faith is *visio*, and this one is fascinating. As you might guess, *visio* is a way of seeing “the whole,” a way of seeing “what is.” And there are three ways of seeing it.
  - a. One is to see reality as **essentially hostile**, as if everyone and everything really were out to get you. It may not surprise you to learn that there have been some forms of popular Christianity through the centuries that have viewed reality this way, as if God himself were out to get us, and that—unless we offered the right sacrifices, or said the right prayers, or did the right things—he would.
  - b. In the second way of looking at reality it is **essentially indifferent**. Someone with this view might say, “The universe is made up of swirling force fields of matter and energy, but is neither hostile to nor supportive of our lives and dreams.”<sup>iv</sup> And if God is the one who brought it all into being, he has long since stopped intervening or even caring. If you look at reality this way, you might not be as defensive as in that other view, but you might become rather selfish, looking out only for yourself and those you love, since obviously no one else is.
  - c. In the third way of looking at reality it is **essentially nourishing and life-giving**. It has brought us and everything else into existence. It is filled with wonder and beauty. It loves us and cares about us. This is the reality Jesus was talking about when he said, “Look at the birds of the air, the flowers of the field.” God feeds them. God clothes them. God sends his rain on the just and the unjust.

Can you see what a difference faith as *visio* could make in your life? What a difference there would be in seeing reality as essentially hostile, essentially indifferent, or essentially nourishing and life-giving? This last way of looking at reality can lead to the radical trust we talked about earlier. As Borg says, “It leads to the kind of life we see in Jesus and the saints, known and unknown. Or, to use words from Paul, it leads to a life marked by freedom, joy, peace, and love.”<sup>v</sup>

There they are: four Latin words for faith—*assensus*, *fiducia*, *fidelitas*, and *visio*—and you may have noticed that all but the first are relational words. *Fiducia* describes a

relationship of radical trust. *Fidelitas* describes a relationship of love and loyalty. *Visio* describes a relationship of life-giving nurture. *Assensus* is the only one that means giving our intellectual assent to a set of theological propositions and, as I said, that's important.

But it may not be the most important thing.

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed," Jesus said, "you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." And so we try to increase our faith. We try to believe more and doubt less. We try to believe things that are, frankly, unbelievable. And we do it because there are mountains that need to be moved. But what if that's not what Jesus meant? What if he meant, "You don't need more faith. You only need the tiniest little speck. No, it's not about having more faith, it's about putting your faith in the right place, or more specifically, in the right person." Because here is the truth: that little "mustard seed" is found only five times in the Gospels. It's mentioned twice in reference to faith, as in, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed." But the other three times Jesus uses it he talks about how, if it's planted in the ground, this tiny seed can become a huge bush, even a tree, in which the birds of the air can build their nests. A mustard seed, in other words, is something small that can grow big—if you put it in the ground. But if you put it in a Ziploc bag, and bury it in the bottom of your sock drawer? That mustard seed will always stay the same size.

What if Jesus is trying to tell us this: that we don't need a lot of faith, we only need the tiniest little speck. But we need to put our faith in the right place—not in ourselves and our ability to believe—but in God, the One who gives us life and nurtures it, the One who loves us like a faithful spouse, the One we can trust completely, and yes, the One who can and does move mountains. Let us put our mustard seed of faith in him, and watch it grow.

I keep thinking about Marcus Borg's wife trying to teach her son to swim, helping him as he struggles and thrashes in the water, telling him over and over again to relax. And then I picture him finally listening to her, hearing her, and obeying her—stretching himself out on the surface of the water like you would stretch yourself out on a king size bed, feeling it beneath him lifting him up, holding him, even as his mother's arms are beneath him, supporting him. I can almost hear him gasp with wonder as he realizes he

can float, and almost see the smile on his face as he lies there on the water with his eyes closed, rocking gently back and forth as his mother says, “O, ye of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

—*Jim Somerville* © 2016

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<sup>i</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003).

<sup>ii</sup> Borg attributes this metaphor to Soren Kierkegaard.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36