

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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October 2, 2016

World Communion Sunday

2 Timothy 1:1-7

Luke 17:1-6

A SPIRIT OF...

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day when we celebrate how Christians the world over are united around the Lord's Table. It is a day to affirm God's great gift of peace, and yet it is also a day that calls out to us about how far the world has to go to embrace and be shaped by that peace. We see wars and atrocious acts of violence in various places in the world carried out by nations, bands of rebels, ideologues combining their love of power with hatred of others in death-dealing ways. As a result we see humanitarian efforts hampered and sometimes even targeted. As a result people don't have their basic needs of food, shelter, and health care met, and there have arisen tidal waves of refugees and immigrants seeking a safe and welcoming place somewhere. As a result we see increasing expressions of racism used to try to keep away those who are seen as problematic. Many of our political leaders have not risen to the challenge, but instead have descended into demonizing others which has led to further division and distrust. There's all that and there's quite a number of world problems I've yet to mention on this World Communion Sunday. So if you find yourself dispirited about the challenges the world faces, I dare say you are not alone.

Similar feelings may have been going on inside Jesus' disciples when they asked him to increase their faith. As we heard in our reading from Luke, Jesus had been teaching his followers about the need for them to live exemplary lives as little ones were watching. He implored them to have a spirit and practice of forgiveness at work in their lives even if someone wronged them seven times in one day. What was their response? "Increase our faith!" they implored him. Scratch the surface of that plea and right under it we would likely hear their self-assessment that they couldn't begin to do what Jesus commanded. Someone else may have enough faith to do that, Lord, but we don't. Our faith is too small.

I think I can relate to the disciples. On many days it is hard enough for me to envision one nation under God, much less one world under God. Do I really trust that all will be well, God will provide, and all things will work together for good for those who love God? What difference can I make? My faith is too small, God. I'm not sure I can hang in there.

To the disciples' request to increase their faith, Jesus doesn't respond the way they wanted, and perhaps it isn't the way we would want either. Instead of miraculously filling up their hearts with a mega dose of faith, he talks about what they could do if they had faith even the size of the minuscule mustard seed. In the original language of Luke's gospel, there are two types of 'if' clauses. One kind of 'if' expresses a condition contrary to fact, such as "if I were you," which I am not. The other 'if' expresses a condition according to fact, such as "if Jesus is our Lord," which he is. The 'if' used in this passage is the second kind, so we could translate Jesus' statement: "If you have faith even the size of a mustard seed, and you do, then you could do amazing things." Jesus is not reprimanding them for an absence of faith. Instead he says even the faith they have opens the way to great possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

What kind of possibilities? Jesus talks about it only requiring a tiny mustard seed amount of faith to be able to say to a mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea," and it would happen. What a strange desire for the effects of one's faith, but Jesus is calling for imagination here. A mulberry tree has a deep root system, but even a small amount of faith could cancel out the concept of the undoable and alter the surrounding landscape. A

small amount of faith could take on what seems to be undoable, as in planting a tree in the sea. Only a small amount of faith is needed to be in touch with the power of God, the source of our faith.

In our earlier reading from Paul's letter to young Timothy, he urged him to recognize that God had not given him "a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." That is an interesting trio of words – power, love, self-discipline. Exercises of power without love and self-discipline are what have led this world to many of the difficulties that now face us. As I said earlier, the state of the world has left many of us feeling dispirited. But if we have even a mustard seed amount of faith, we are not in fact dispirited, for God is the One who has given us a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Can we believe that?

I was so thankful for those who were able to come a week ago Wednesday to hear Ruth Brown share about her work as a mission co-worker that Warner supports in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The food and health care needs of the people of that poor, poor country are at times overwhelming, but Ruth and the dedicated people of faith with whom she works are anything but dispirited. They have seen God open doors to wonderful possibilities of a network of health clinics that are saving and improving lives along with a renewed wave of a moringa tree initiative that we have talked about before with its tremendous nutrient-rich leaves offering a way to overcome the malnutrition that impacts so many. What is going on there demonstrates a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline that is bringing resurrection life to the Kasai region of Congo. Ruth had enough faith to go to a place of great need and God has combined her gifts with those of others to do great things. You may not know it, but we have helped that spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline be expressed through our financial and spiritual support. Those who heard Ruth speak were encouraged by what we heard and I think it was clear that Ruth was encouraged by our interest and desire that the work there be strengthened. A spirit of encouragement was working through Ruth on us and through us on Ruth. That spirit of encouragement was the opposite of the spirit of cowardice or timidity that Paul warned Timothy against. Such a spirit of encouragement leads to innovation and inspiration so the spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline can find fuller expression in faraway places and right here at home.

When our mustard seed sized faith enables us to focus less on the daunting challenges we face and more on the amazing God we serve, then we will no longer have a spirit of impotence, but rather a spirit of power. Our spirit of indifference will be replaced with a spirit of love. No longer will we be characterized by a spirit of self-absorption because we will be possessed by a spirit of self-discipline. This is no time for a dispirited church so God will lead us to a spirited response to the needs we see all around us. Just a mustard seed sized faith can turn our focus away from our inabilities and toward God's ability, for that's who can turn around a world that is hell-bent on destructive ways, that's who can turn despair into hope, that's who can turn fear into dedication, that's who can turn a crucifying death into resurrection. We may join the disciples in pleading, "Increase our faith," but Jesus might well respond, "Just use the faith and the spirit that you have been given and you can be connected to the One who makes all the difference in the world." Thanks be to God. Amen.

1 Greek grammatical analysis based on Fred Craddock's commentary on Luke in the Interpretation Series published by John Knox Press in 1990.