

## Sermon: It's Who You Know

Year C, Proper 22

[Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10](#)

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When I was flooded out of my house in May 2006, I left in the middle of the night barely ahead of the flood waters. It was at that point that I realized that, maybe, it was not so brilliant to have my safety deposit box lower in the same flood plain than my house. It all turned out ok, all the papers in my safety deposit box stayed dry and they're now in the bank that's at the highest elevation in Andover.

But it made me think. What's in my safety deposit box is all the papers that will be a real pain to replace. But it's not what I treasure. *Guard the good treasure entrusted to you* (2 Timothy 1:14) it says in 2 Timothy. But my good treasures are in my house, they're with me every day. They're my grandmother's needlework and family photos, journals from trips I've taken. My good treasures, the ones that made it into the car that horrible night, are the old melon baller that fits so perfectly in my hand and the powder puff that came from a drug store now long closed.

But really, beyond that, our good treasures are not even things. We would trade everything for another dinner at our mother's table or to give our son respite from his addiction. Our good treasures are the relationships we have, the people and yes, since next week we'll celebrate the Blessing of the Animals, the animals, we love and who love us right back. They are the good treasures, perhaps our best treasures, even if we don't keep them locked in a bank vault.

Our faith is like that too. Think about Paul. When he describes his conversion, he describes an encounter, not an argument.<sup>1</sup> Paul's head didn't decide to follow Jesus and his heart just tagged along. Indeed, in all the letters we have from him, Paul rarely says *what* he believes in. But he spends a great deal of time talking about *who* he believes in.<sup>2</sup> A lot of us are the same way. We have relationships with God, with this community which gathers to worship God together. When we talk to people who don't come to church about how much we get out of going to church, they often ask us *why* we go or *what* we get out of it. It's really hard to answer those questions because they're the wrong questions. We answered a *who* question and the *whys* and the *whats* came along later.

In the second letter to Timothy, we learn about a young faith leader who's headed out into the world to further share what he has gained from the relationships in his life. In the ancient world, if you admired someone, if they were your teacher and you followed in their footsteps, you would sign their name to your work. You weren't trying to pass off something you had done as theirs. It was a way of showing respect and admiration. The ancients felt it was more honest to say, "look, I got all these ideas from So and So, so I put So and So's name on it." As best the scholars can tell, the letter we read today was written a couple of generations after Paul and Timothy were doing their work. We'll call the young minister "Timothy" but you want to be aware that it isn't the same guy as we see in some of the other epistles or the Book of Acts.

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<sup>1</sup>J. Peter Holmes, "Proper 22, Homiletical Perspective, 2 Timothy 1:1-14" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY:Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 175.

<sup>2</sup>William Barclay, *The Letter to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 152.

Timothy is headed out into the wider world, to preach and teach what he has learned from his teacher about Jesus and God. His teacher is trying to reassure him that he'll do fine, he just needs to get out there. So Timothy gets reminded of the relationships which have brought him this far and which support him. There was his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. If I didn't know better, I'd say he had grown up in New England, given those names. His teacher calls him "my beloved child" (2 Timothy 1:2). These relationships are real human relationships. They lead to tears and joy (2 Timothy 1:4). They may also lead to shame, both because of the message Timothy will now preach and because Timothy's teacher is under arrest for preaching the same message (2 Timothy 1:8). And the relationships between student and teacher and between disciple and Jesus are going to lead to suffering (2 Timothy 1:8). They're only too human, a mix of so many things, but it is those relationships that Timothy is urged to hold onto. If Timothy is to be courageous as he reaches out to people about Jesus, it appears that what will strengthen his faith the most are the relationships that have formed him, not logical arguments and powerful rhetoric. Timothy's faith is going to be tried, and it's the relationships in his life that will see him through the trial.

We're like Timothy, even all these years later. We have faith, or else we wouldn't be here on a Sunday morning. Like Timothy, our faith is mixed with fear and doubt. Like the disciples who followed Jesus personally, we too ask God to increase our faith (Luke 17:5). Think about what we're asking. Faith is not something we make ourselves. The disciples in Luke are not asking Jesus to fine tune their faith generation circuits. We're all asking God the same thing, increase our faith. Faith is a gift. From God. And if we're asking to have our faith increased, then we're not starting from zero. To increase anything means there has to be something there to begin with.

In today's reading from Luke, the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith. He replies, "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. (Luke 17:6).

First, the underlying Greek doesn't say "if you had faith *the size of* a mustard seed"; it says "if you had faith *like* a mustard seed." I know what you're thinking: "Cath, there's no difference between the two statements." All of you got a mustard seed on the cover of your bulletin. And all of you can see it's small. In the ancient world a mustard seed was the thing you referred to when you wanted to refer to a small thing.<sup>3</sup> We say "quiet as a mouse" when we want to describe something really quiet, and we do that because, on the whole, mice are pretty quiet. But in a world with few spices and the ones they had were expensive luxuries, dried mustard seeds had huge flavor. Yes, there were small. But they were also hot, strong and vigorous.<sup>4</sup> Mustard seeds had this amazing ability to grow from tiny seeds to huge bushes very quickly. So while they started out very small, they grew tremendously and they were unexpectedly strong.

The disciples already have faith, and to the extent to which faith can be measured at all, it's probably not small.<sup>5</sup> They have left their families and livelihoods and have gone walking all over Palestine, preaching and teaching, healing and casting out demons, protecting Jesus from the mobs and trying their best to learn about the Kingdom of God. Jesus isn't saying that they don't have faith. Any faith they have is a gift from God. And as yet, they haven't been given the gift that will allow them to move trees from the land to the sea. That's a different kind of gift,

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<sup>3</sup>James W. Scott, "The Misunderstood Mustard Seed: Matt 17:20b; Luke 17:6." *Trinity Journal* 36, no. 1 (2015): 28.

<sup>4</sup>Scott, 29.

<sup>5</sup>Scott, 43.

one that they don't have yet.<sup>6</sup> Maybe they'll get it later. Maybe they won't. But they have faith. And they have enough faith to serve God.

Because that's where Jesus goes next. He talks about a slave serving a master. Now there are two images here that are so loaded in the present day that I don't want to skim over them. The first is the term "slave." American culture is one that is rooted in race and in slavery and we are still struggling with how to face that reality. The word in Greek is "slave" not "servant". But as you listen to that part of the reading, think about how that relationship would be transformed if it was one of love. When I teach kids about God's love, I have to be careful because in some families, saying God loves us like a parent would be a terrible and terrifying thing. So I say, God's love is like what we feel with our pets. For many kids, that's the most affirming, least demanding, purest form of love they experience.

The other image to watch for is "worthless slave." For too many centuries, women and minorities of all types have been told they are worthless. Again the translation from the Greek is correct, the word is "worthless." But again, imagine a relationship based in love. Most of our pets are completely worthless. But they are priceless to us.

So, acknowledging that "slave" and "worthless" are hard phrases to hear and easy to get stuck on, remember what Jesus said after saying that faith like a mustard seed could uproot a tree. Jesus asked his disciples, "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'?" (Luke 17:7-8).

What is the slave doing? Plowing or tending sheep then coming in and serving at the table. On this World Communion Sunday, do you catch the echoes of what Jesus is saying?  
Plowing.Tending Sheep.Serving at the table.<sup>7</sup>

Plowing.Working beyond the edges of civilization, doing work out in the fields.Just another day in the vineyard.

Tending sheep. Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? (Luke 15:4)

Serving at the table.Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' (Luke 22:19)

That is the work of the slave Jesus is talking about. It is our work. We will be out beyond the relationships we are most familiar with. As we do our field work for God, we will be causing the love of God to grow in places it has never been before. As we tend the sheep that have already been gathered by the Good Shepherd, we will be adding to the relationships that keep those sheep healthy and well. As we serve at the Lord's table, we will feed everyone who comes, because all are welcome. That work will never end. Our relationship with God, the relationship

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<sup>6</sup>Scott, 32.

<sup>7</sup>Paul S. Minear, "Note on Luke 17:7-10." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93, no. 1 (1974): 84-85.

that supports and enables the work, will never end.<sup>8</sup> We are promised eternity because we are in a relationship that will never end.

If we can do all that with faith smaller than a mustard seed, imagine what becomes possible as God increases our faith. It's not what we know; it's who we know.

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<sup>8</sup>George Arthur Buttrick, "The Gospel According to St. Luke: Exposition Chs. 13-18," in vol. 8 of *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 297.