

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on Sunday, July 26, 2009 based on Mark 4:30-34.

Mustard Seed Faith

Mary had been thinking about her grandmother quite a bit lately. When Mary was a child, she would spend a major part of her summer with her grandparents at their home in Virginia. Mary remembered it as a happy time of apple picking and strawberry gathering from the trees and vines around her grandparent's place. Her grandparents were always so interested about what she was doing, and she liked the conversation around the table when she would help peel apples and slice strawberries from their picking outings.

She especially remembered how her grandmother would make pies from the apples and strawberries and would keep the pies in a wooden pie safe in the breeze way. The pie safe was a place for the pies to cool after baking and a place for pies to be stored back in the days when refrigeration was less prevalent.

Mary's mother had called recently to say that her grandparents place was about to be sold now that they had passed away, and her mother wondered if she wanted anything from the house. Mary decided that she wanted that pie safe, but it would mean asking her husband, Jim, to go get it.

Mary and Jim now lived in Georgia, and things had not been the best between them lately. They had been married for almost 20 years now, and she loved Jim and everything, and they had a beautiful 16 year old son named Sam. But Jim had been awfully busy lately.

Two years earlier, Jim had bought a heating and air conditioning business, and it was keeping him very busy. He was up early to go to work, and almost every evening after dinner, he would go to his home office to keep the books. And then there were those late night emergency service calls that came in. It was a busy time, and Mary felt that their relationship had drifted, and she felt lonely. So she was not sure how he would react to the request to help get the pie safe.

Jim was not too keen on the idea of taking time away from the business and driving to Virginia to get a piece of old furniture. But when Mary suggested that Sam go along, Jim liked the idea of a road trip with his son. Mary decided not to go so there would be room for everything to be brought back. Besides, she thought it was good to have a little separation time. While the men were gone, she thought about the future, and she just wasn't sure she could trust how things were going to be. There was so much she wanted to talk to Jim about, but would he listen? Three days later, Jim and Sam were back from Virginia pulling a trailer behind their car. The trailer had a car on it. Jim and Sam were all excited that they had found this car in her parent's home town. They were planning to fix it up together so Sam would have a car to drive. But then Mary noticed that the pie safe was inside the car all in pieces.

Trust – how much trust do you have?... My hunch is that your trust level depends on the situation. What I have discovered is that trust can never be demanded. Trust can only be earned. Are you a trusting person? Do other people trust you?

Right now our national leaders are having a debate about reforming the health care system, and one of the questions seems to come down to how much we trust the government. Do we trust the government to be able to run a health care system or should it be kept in the hands of free enterprise? The government seems to know how to do it when it comes to Social Security and Medicare, though we know there are some long term funding issues ahead, and in theory government is responsible to the public through the ballot box to have our best interests in mind. But it always seems to come down to the question of trust in government. I like to think that a government "of the people" can do it, but time will tell.

I ask the question about trust because faith is pretty much about trust. To have faith in God is about trusting in something you can not see and not always feel, but you are asked to believe and trust that it is true and important. How much trust do you have in God?

Jesus raises the question of faith and trust in scripture. He tells the parable of the mustard seed:

³⁰He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

I brought some mustard seeds with me today. They are indeed very small. Yet this is the seed that is to grow into a mighty presence in our life called the kingdom of God.

Jesus is always talking about the "kingdom of God" in his ministry. We hear that phrase so often out of the mouth of Jesus that we tend to gloss over it. But what did Jesus mean?

John MacQuarrie, a Systematic Theologian, wrote some years ago:
We have already sufficiently indicated how the kingdom of God is to be conceived. It would be a commonwealth of free beings, united in Being and with each other through love, yet since this is the love that lets-be, preserving a diversity that heightens the value of the unity far above that of any undifferentiated unity.

Theologians – don't you just love them! I think what he is trying to say is that the 'kingdom of God' is about the ways of God being practiced freely through us that brings the ways of God into the world through a love that is united but diverse. For me, the ways of God are about faith, trust, love, compassion, and hope.

We are invited to let the ways of God to grow in us like a mighty bush that connects us to God and each other in love, compassion, and understanding. It is about the seed of faith growing into a mighty lifestyle of connection to God and others. The question is, "Are we willing to let the ways of God grow that much?"

I have bushes in my lawn. They grow wildly, and I am always deciding how much to let them grow and how much to trim them back. When Jesus compared the ways of God to a mighty bush, he was talking about taking the seed of faith in God and allowing it to grow into a big presence in our life. That takes trust on our part to allow that to happen. We are always tempted to keep trimming it back and only allow God to be a small section of our existence if at all. Jesus seems to be inviting us to trust God enough to allow faith to be a mighty presence in our existence that not only includes a relationship with God but consideration of others.

That takes trust on our part to be so open with God and others and allow compassion and love to be our guide. Yet it is the message Jesus preached over and over again who preached that this way leads to a better life and a better world.

How often we are afraid to allow the seed of faith to grow that much. Fear is the opposite of faith. When we are afraid, we pull back. We have lack of trust. We doubt. So we can't believe it can be different. This is part of what the issue is about health care reform. We become afraid that anything different won't work. So we get stuck in the malaise of fear.

Mary was afraid. Her husband had taken apart a precious heirloom, and she was upset. All the lack of trust in their relationship came spilling out, and they had a terrible argument. Jim explained that Mary's father and he discovered that the pie safe was assembled in pieces and that it would travel better in sections. The car became a safe place to transport the pieces. He said he needed her help to put the pieces back together. Over the next few evenings they worked together in the basement to re-assemble the pie safe. They also talked about where their life was and how the stresses of life were affecting their relationship. Jim began to understand how the new business was taking so much of his time that they were out of balance. As the pie safe came back together so did their appreciation for each other, and they spoke of ways to bring their life more in balance and work together. Today the pie safe stands as a symbol of the living relationship of trust and respect they have for each other.

Mustard seed faith is allowing the ways of God to grow in you in such a way that you learn to trust more, believe more, hope more. Mustard

seed faith is allowing the ways of God to grow in you so that you become that free being that is united with God and others in love. It takes trust. Jesus invites us to trust God enough to allow the ways and practices of God to grow in us for a better us and a better world. Can you have growing faith like a mustard seed? Amen.