

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
October 6, 2019
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

I'm not a big fan of Thanksgiving. It was never much of a holiday in my home growing up, and as an adult, either Travis or I spent most of our Thanksgivings on call for teens in crisis in his case or the emergency room for mine. We tended to decline invitations, and we seldom invited people over to our home. In fact, I remember many Thanksgivings eating pizza and watching long BBC period adaptations that could easily be paused in case one of us was called out of the house.

So, last year, we tried something different. We invited two sets of friends over and made a proper meal. The house was cleaned, and we spent the day kind of lounging, taking long fall walks, and, importantly, turning on the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. I hadn't seen this since I was probably eight years old, and with all due respect to fans, I'm not sure I'd been missing a lot. I sort of half listened to the breathless reporting on the provenance of the Snoopy balloons and watched B actresses lip sync to post-war Christmas songs. It was fine. What caught my attention, though, was a pretty serious blasphemy right in the middle of the festivities.

When a float or a marching band or the cast of a Broadway musical would stop and kind of do their 60 second finale for the camera, they were standing under this enormous sign that said Macy's, and under it, in gold lettering, it said Believe! That's all. Just believe. What, precisely, am I to be believing in? Retail? Santa Claus? The Rockettes? The sign was short on details. It just said, "believe." What was Macy's doing mucking around in the territory of the church?

The disciples come to Jesus this morning asking that their faith be increased. And who, really, can't relate to that. I have days where my belief in the goodness of God is practically bursting out of me, and I have other days where I ask with other characters in the Bible, Where are you God?

Jesus gives them a typically cryptic and now-famous answer about needing only the faith of a mustard seed to accomplish the impossible. Sometimes Christians have read this as almost a recipe for magic — if I could only have the proper kind of faith, I could move a mountain or levitate or do something supernatural out of a comic book. This is one reading, but I don't think it's the best one. A preacher I really admire once said that "God resources God's vision." I like that. The task in front of us as Christians might seem impossible, but we can do it with a little faith. In response to the disciple's question of faith, Jesus provides the insight of the mustard seed and then an allegory about working in the fields. Do you really thank a servant for doing what a servant was supposed to do in the first place? Do you really thank a Christian for doing what a Christian was supposed to do in the first place? That's Jesus' somewhat bracing point.

I have to pause the sermon for a little teaching thing that I don't normally do, but it's really important. Many of our parables use the term slave, often as a metaphor of the disciples' relationship to God. We hear that word differently than did ancient listeners. While there was a

robust, and sometimes violent, institution of slavery in the ancient near east, it differed in many respects from the scope and the horror of the African slave trade to the Americas. I want to treat these metaphors contextually and appropriately, knowing that our world is altered by the evil that was the trans-Atlantic slave trade. We'd be likely better off hearing that word as indentured servant to divorce it from our 21st century ears. Lesson over.

People come into my office sometimes to talk about faith. Sometimes they are singing the praises of God, and they are beaming with the joy of a personal relationship with Jesus. I reflect back how wonderful that is and suggest that they go into the world and joyfully care for God's children through helping the least and the lost. Sometimes people come to my office to say that they have very little faith left in the weary world. I reflect back that losing faith can be upsetting and can feel really lonely. And then I suggest that they go into the world with their grief to care for God's children through helping the least and the lost. And in more rare cases, people come into my office to say that they have lost their faith completely and that God is not present to them. I hold their truth as best as I can, and then I suggest that they go into the world with their doubt to care for God's children through helping the least and the lost.

Jesus doesn't seem to be concerned with the size of a person's faith — after all, a mustard seed will do — but Jesus does seem to be concerned with how a person serves in this world. I wonder if the two stories are linked — through service, we can do the impossible; we can move that mulberry tree out into the ocean.

Jesus knows, and I know, and you probably know that our faith can be fickle, but God's faith is not. Whether we are able to muster a blazing apostolic faith at any given moment has exactly zero impact on whether God believes us to be worth love and attention. God's response to us is absolute faithfulness. Our response to God is service. Lots of religious authors — from the Psalmists to the mystics — connect service and obedience to God with joy. That always strikes me as advanced Christianity. I'm not sure I've unlocked that achievement yet. But I have a feeling that it will happen one day — that moment when serving God turns into joy. Until then, I will continue to serve as best I can, knowing that the faith part of it will take care of itself.

The world wants to turn belief into a shiny sign above a Thanksgiving Day float. It sparkles but ultimately doesn't mean anything. Or the world wants faith to be a magic spell that can make us superheroes. Real faith, though, is tiny, everyday, variable, and humble. It is a gift, and it is also a task. And, while our faith in our God is a part of the Christian faith, God's faith in us is the center of the Christian faith. Amen.