

## Stumbling Into Faith

*Luke 17: 1-10*

Jesus said to his disciples, “Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! **2** It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. **3** Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. **4** And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.” **5** The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” **6** The Lord replied, “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. **7** “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’? **8** 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’? **9** Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? **10** So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’”

Well, it appears Jesus is on a roll. Another doozy of a parable in a string of parables about stewardship. First is the series about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son who squanders his inheritance. Then the parable of the shrewd manager who squanders his boss’ investments. Then the parable about the rich man and Lazarus—Lazarus is Greek for Eleazar who was Abraham’s steward in the Old Testament. And now this: a parable about stumbling and heavy stones around people’s necks. About forgiveness and mustard seeds. And to top it all off is a remark about servants coming in after a long day only to serve us as we demand our dinner. Yikes! You know, sometimes I just want to say to Jesus, “You’ve dug yourself too deep a hole on this one. There is no redeeming your words!” I mean, what in the world is happening and what does the parable have to do with stewardship?

So start by noticing the first thing Jesus says. We will stumble. Stumbling is a reality for a person of faith. Faith asks us to do some counterintuitive things: like to look upon our enemies with eyes of compassion. Like to forgive those who say sorry, yet to continue to do it again and again. No more ‘first time shame on you, second time shame on me.’ Faith asks us to take a shame free posture. Asks us to examine our attachments to our job or money or the identity we’ve worked so hard to make for ourselves. Now I don’t know about you, but in today’s polarized world, faith asks us to do the difficult thing of remaining open to others even when they aren’t open to us. And there are moments when we will stumble over the gospel.

So maybe as a response, like the disciples, we say, “Lord, increase our faith! Help me to be the person you desire me to be!” To which Jesus responds by...talking about a mustard seed? Now, because the disciples ask for an increase, we often translate Jesus’ response as saying, “If you had the faith the size of a mustard seed you could even order around a mulberry tree.” So we interpret Jesus as being a bit judgy about the size of our faith. And that even a bit of faith can do extraordinary things. However, in the Greek it says nothing about faith’s size mattering. It actually says, “If you have faith *like a mustard seed*...” It isn’t about the size of our faith, but the

kind of faith we have. Which raises the question: what kind of faith does a mustard seed have? Does a mustard seed worry about whether it has the correct set of theological beliefs? Does a mustard seed lose sleep over getting other mustard seeds into heaven someday?

Does a mustard seed compare itself to other mustard seeds? Or does it simply relax into the soil, trusting that it will do what it was created to do?

What if Jesus is saying that faith isn't something we strive for, it's natural—it's normal—it's something we already have access to if only we could relax into who we are and trust that what we are doing is what we have been created to do. The disciples say, "Increase our faith," and Jesus' response is, "You already have it! And it is enough to do some extraordinary things!"

If we look at it from having faith *like a mustard seed*, then it illuminates the horrible second part of the parable about servants and us demanding our dinner as well.

Here is another way to interpret what he's saying:

When a mailperson delivers the mail, do you invite them into the house saying, "Have a seat, kick up your feet. Let me turn on the television for you, and can I mix you up a dry martini?" Of course not! You don't treat them as special for simply doing their job. So, when we have done our job, we say, "It's really no big deal, for we have done nothing more than what we are supposed to do." And now we are back to stewardship.

When someone squanders our trust, and we choose to forgive them. When a poor person is begging for food, and we choose to provide for them. When we show hospitality, or affirm someone, or are patient with each other, or are generous with our resources, are we doing anything special? Or have we done nothing more than what we are supposed to do?

These kinds of things aren't something we can usually control. They are things we simply stumble into. Like learning Spanish together to make our amigos *sienten contento* (friends feel content). Or becoming the new home for Triad Restorative Justice. Or reorganizing our committee structure. It's an organic process where we simply trust that things will evolve as they are supposed to—and at the end of the day, it's far more impactful than we've realized.

I mean, how many times have we done something small for someone else only to learn later how much that small act of kindness meant to them? Like bringing a meal after being sick, or during grief, or after having a baby. Or simply by providing a safe space for someone to be themselves. Most of the time we have no idea how our kindness impacts someone. And it is always more than we imagined.

There was a story about a young Black man reflecting on when he was in high school. He was messing with people who could've landed him in jail or killed. But he said, one teacher—an African American woman—always went out of her way to keep telling him that she believed in him. Years later, the young man became a teacher himself and when the story brought the two of them together, he thanked her for being the beacon of hope in his life. She said, "Thank you. I am so proud of you. But what is a teacher if not someone who believes in her students." She was just doing what she was doing. Just like a servant does what a servant does. Just like God does what God does.

So we keep doing what we do. We love wide. We work side by side for justice. We relax into a faith which is organic and natural. And when we do, we stumble into something far more wonderful and far more exciting than we may have expected: the assurance that what we do and who we are will impact the world beyond what we realize. And somehow, we already have all the faith we need. And if we ever have any doubts, just look at the faith of a mustard seed. Amen.