**Weekly Seeds: Sunday, October 2, 2022 Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost | Year C**

**Focus Theme: Increase Our Faith**

**Focus Prayer: Awesome One, give us faith that uproots and replants for your glory**

 **and for the kindom.**

**All readings for this Sunday: Jeremiah 32:1–3a, 6–15 and Psalm 91:1–6, 14–16 or**

**Amos 6:1a, 4–7 and Psalm 146, 1 Timothy 6:6–19, Luke 16:19–31**

**Focus Reading: Luke 17:5–10**
**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!’”**

**Focus Questions:
1. Identify someone who demonstrates great faith. How do you perceive their faith**

**manifesting in their lives?
2. Do you measure your faith? What are appropriate benchmarks?
3. How have you demonstrated great faith?
4. In what ways would you like to see your faith increased?
5. What needs to be uprooted and replanted in your life…by faith?**

**Reflection By Cheryl Lindsay**

**Jesus is having a conversation about seeds and trees in response to a simple yet complicated request from his disciples to increase their faith. It’s simple because the ask is direct and narrowly focused. It’s complicated because it revolves around faith, and that’s always complicated. Seeds can also seem to be simple. They’re small in size, and Jesus references the smallest known seed during his time. They have a narrow focus and function. If you plant a seed, it will grow into some plant, shrub, or tree. A seed, like our faith, can exist as it is, but is intended to lead to so much more.**

**The passage opens with this plea from the disciples; context is essential to understand why Jesus responds in the way that he does. You may have read the previous passage in worship the previous Sunday as the Gospel reading from the lectionary. In the first verses of chapter 17, Luke recounts Jesus warning against the dangers of stumbling. In fact, his warning was about causing someone else to stumble even more than stumbling oneself. It’s a text about mutual dependency, support, accountability, and forgiveness in just four relatively brief verses. He calls the disciples to it, and their response to that teaching is a cry for help in fulfilling it, “Increase our faith!”**

**The exclamation point signals the intensity of the challenge the disciples experienced upon hearing Jesus’ instruction. They don’t ask for clarity, because his words are simple and easy to understand. The challenge is living them in a world and a community that isn’t conditioned that way.**

**Jesus warns his disciples that it is impossible to avoid stumbling (skandala).**

**Momentarily, Luke’s audience might take this as their own stumbling, but 17:1 quickly shifts to causing another to stumble. A millstone around the neck is a radical punishment metaphor for causing one “little” one to stumble (17:2). This recalls the little children of 10:21, who know their parent and know they are God’s children; that is, the “little flock” in 12:32, to whom God gives the commonwealth as fulfillment of promises to Abraham, and Lazarus from the preceding parable.**

**Anyone familiar with Scripture might remember skandala that caused Israel to fall away from God. Suddenly Jesus turns to forgiveness. Failing to forgive is an instance of skandala (17:3–4). Does 17:5 skip to another issue, or is faith(fulness) the condition for avoiding skandala? Repeatedly, Luke dramatizes faith(fulness) as action. The apostles’ request implies a profusion of faith(fulness) beyond what they already have; Jesus reduces what they presume they have to less than a mustard seed (17: 5–6).”** Robert Bradley

**Seeds need particular conditions to grow. The soil and the surrounding environment have to be conducive to that seed’s development. A water supply is necessary for growth, but too much water can overwhelm the seed and stunt development. Oh, and the seed has to die.**

**A plant isn’t a seed, and a seed isn’t a plant. In order for the seed to become the next thing it’s supposed to be on its lifecycle, it has to die to its current state. It has to crack open and let the life within itself spring forth. The seed doesn’t get a choice in this, but the choice would be to remain the same as a seed or to submit to radical transformation in order to become what it was created to be.**

**The tree, in this case a mulberry tree, exists on the other side of that choice. It’s the result of a seed that has flourished, spread and grown tall as it benefits from wide roots:**

**In Jesus’ culture, to uproot a mulberry tree was practically impossible. The mulberry tree was a good-sized tree, upwards of 35 feet, three stories high. More importantly, it had roots like no other tree, spreading 40 feet in all directions. You didn’t want to dig a cistern or vat to store rainwater within 40 feet of a mulberry tree because the roots would head right toward the water and penetrate into the cistern. The roots of a mulberry tree were so extensive and so powerfully entrenched that, according to the rabbis, they would stay in the earth for 600 years. To uproot a mulberry tree was a seemingly impossible thing.** Don Sunukjian

**The comparison between the small yet promising seed and the mature, flourishing tree surely was made with intention. In Matthew’s account of this teaching, the mustard seed remains the seed but the tree doesn’t need to be uprooted and replanted; the mountain needs moving. A mountain does not form from a tree; it’s an elevation in once flat ground that occurs as a result of a massive shift under the surface of the earth. Mountains, like trees, depend upon underground activity, but a mountain serves as a correction and safeguard rather than the birthing of new life.**

**Both Matthew and Luke’s accounts encouraged their audiences to shift their expectations of the messianic promise. Luke particularly addressed the expansiveness of the kindom of God to include the excluded, the marginalized, the silenced, and the unnoticed.**

**“the portrayal of Jesus and his witnesses as prophets constitutes an important part of Luke’s overall agenda: to assure his audience of “the certainty of the things [they] have been taught” (Luke 1: 4). Although they have received Christian instruction, Luke’s audience seems to be questioning some of its central claims.[ 17] This is perhaps understandable, as their times did not much resemble the expected messianic age. They believed that the messianic age had been inaugurated with the advent of Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One eagerly awaited by many first-century Jews. Most Jews, however, were not expecting a messiah like Jesus.”**

**Trees may be uprooted during natural disasters; it is not a typical practice to remove trees from the roots in order to replant them. That’s an extraordinary action. On the other hand, mountains move. That’s what they do; that’s how they are formed. Matthew isn’t necessarily challenging his hearers to do the impossible, he’s suggesting their actions can drive the most magnificent of existing and natural processes. It’s still miraculous, but it is as expected. Matthew wrote to an audience who expected the messiah to come to them if not in the way that Jesus came. Luke wrote to expand the audience of those receiving Christ’s entry into the world. He suggests something also possible but daunting in the ways that prophets often challenge their hearers to do the hard work of transformation and new life.**

**That tree once lived in the small confines of the seed. They are connected and mutually dependent. The tree needs the seed to give up its life for the tree to be born; the seed needs the tree to grow for the seed’s purpose to ultimately be fulfilled.**

**What if we had faith, like the mustard seed, to give up an easy path of life in order to pursue the harder path of transformation and new life in Christ. This past spring, I spent a lot of time in New Orleans. I can’t say I encountered a mulberry tree, but there was certainly evidence of trees with long lifespans. Walking on old streets lined with even older trees, I could see the roots breaking through the pavement. Each step on the uneven ground served as a tangible reminder of the strength of those roots to anchor the tree in the earth and to carry the weight of the world above it.**

**Roots spread and grow and tangle with the roots of nearby trees. The roots remain separate and distinct, but they form a network that can be stronger together or that can compete for precious resources. The prevalence of forests in nature signals that the former is the plan and the latter is an aberration. Jesus’ teaching invites us to live in interconnected community…like trees planted by the water.**

**We don’t grow roots that intertwine to stabilize and strengthen our behaviors. We do have practices and behaviors that uplift and support, build up and facilitate our collective and individual flourishing. That way of being together isn’t miraculous or even extraordinary. When we embrace our mutual dependency and accountability, as Jesus stated in concluding this lesson, “We have done only what we ought to have done!**

**Increase our faith.**

**Reflection from Voices of People of African Descent:**
The 33rd General Synod adopted a Resolution to Recognize the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024). As part of its implementation, Sermon and Weekly Seeds offers Reflection from Voices of People of African Descent related to the season or overall theme for additional consideration in sermon preparation and for individual and congregational study.

**The human soul is not defined by the unpredictable and vacillating protestations of society, nor is it accountable to the politics and prejudices of human history. Rather, it is responsive to a vision of justice that stands above the biased considerations of a nation at any given time. The soul is inextricably bound to the transcendent “moral arc of the universe, that bends toward justice”–a justice that is nothing other than the perfect justice of God.**

**It was perhaps that conception of the human soul that Abraham Lincoln invoked in his first inaugural address, stating that he hoped that the nation would be “touched” by “the better angels of our nature.” In effect, he was suggesting that a nation has something analogous to the human soul–a vital moral core that propels a nation, as it does a human person, toward its highest aspirational self. In the case of a nation, that would be a future in which all human beings are treated with equal dignity and, therefore, respected as the divinely created beings that we all are.**

**This brings us to the question: What has corrupted the very soul of America, resulting not only in routine violence against Black lives, but also in preventing people from simply reaching for their best selves and treating others, no matter how “raced,” with decency and compassion? The answer: whiteness itself.**

**As I have argued in previous texts, whiteness is not a biological or an ethnic given. Rather, it is a socially construction demarcation of race that serves as a badge of privilege and power. It fuels white supremacy, which in turn exists to protect it. White supremacy is the network of systemic, structural, and ideological realities that protect the “presumed” superiority of whiteness by granting certain privileges to those raced white and not to others. These are the privileges of social, political, economic, and even personal entitlements, such as claiming space and “standing one’s ground.” It is in this way that whiteness signals social relationships of power.**

**It defines the relationship between those who represent the “privileged dominant caste” (signaled by whiteness) and those who represent the “subjugated caste” (signaled by Blackness). —** Kelly Brown Douglas, Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter

**For further reflection:**
**“There is nothing impossible with God. All the impossibility is with us when we measure God by the limitations of our unbelief.”**— Smith Wigglesworth

**“I discovered a version of the sinner’s prayer that increased my faith far more than the one that I had said years earlier…In this version, there were no formulas, no set phrases that promised us safe passage across the abyss. There was only our tattered trust that the Spirit who had given us life would not leave us in the wilderness without offering us life again.” —** Barbara Brown Taylor

**“In a way that I haven’t yet figured out how to fully articulate, I believe that children who get to see bald eagles, coyotes, deer, moose, grouse, and other similar sights each morning will have a certain kind of matrix or fabric or foundation of childhood, the nature and quality of which will be increasing rare and valuable as time goes on, and which will be cherished into adulthood, as well as becoming- and this is a leap of faith by me- a source of strength and knowledge to them somehow. That the daily witnessing of the natural wonders is a kind of education of logic and assurance that cannot be duplicated by any other means, or in other place: unique and significant, and, by God, still somehow relevant, even now, in the twenty-first century.”** — Rick Bass