

Faith the Size of a Buckthorn Seed

Luke 17:5-10
West Denmark Lutheran Church

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I should be leading us in celebrating the bounty the earth produces - tomatoes, squash, apples, and mostly this year, nuts. But reading this passage, where Jesus says if his followers have faith the size of a mustard seed, they could tell a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea, all I could think about was buckthorn.

I don't know why you would want to get rid of a mulberry tree, but Mark and I, and probably many of you, spend a lot of time trying to get buckthorn to move, if not into the sea, then into the fire, or anyplace else, where it can't grow back. We have a piece of land where a couple of years ago, buckthorn was pretty much all you could see. Even when you clear a patch – you get that fancy Extractigator from Canada to pry up the roots, you cut the big ones and follow with Round-up, you pull the small ones- buckthorn comes back, sending sprouts up from what seemed like dead trunks, spreading out, reclaiming the territory. While we sweat through our shirts, exhausted way before you can even see a difference, our minds travel to everything else that overwhelms us – lies that start small but spread, take root, and supplant the truth; violence that seeps into every corner of life; international retaliation that grows into unfathomable levels of starvation and destruction; you name it. Buckthorn: the manifestation of sin in our lives.

I can almost imagine an alternative harvest fest, where instead of displaying our best and biggest and most beautiful produce, we'd bring in everything undesirable we harvested this year – the weeds pulled, the plants we let die, the roadside trash, the microplastics, the buckthorn. I don't know what we would do in such a ritual – maybe confess our paltry efforts, our need for grace, our intention to keep going in spite of the impossibility of it all.

I think that's what the disciples wanted. They are traveling with Jesus to Jerusalem, and he's trying to fortify them for what's to come. He's talking about hard things – the gulf between rich and poor, the need to constantly forgive, the care it takes not to trip each other up. If this is only a tiny part of what it means to follow Jesus, no wonder the disciples ask him to increase their faith. There's no way they can do what he's asking. They need more.

They are being smart here. They're not asking for "faith" like a set of doctrines you sign onto, as if having the right set of beliefs would give them superpowers. They want trust, or, better, a vision of what life might be like, different than what's in front of them. Like the vision of life that Jesus was describing, only seeing it for themselves. The disciples and Habakkuk know you can't force that kind of vision; it's not positive thinking. Catching Christ's vision, seeing different possibilities for the world, for their ways of living; that comes as a gift, and often you have to wait for it. Like with buckthorn: At first, it's all you see. Then you begin to picture what that hillside could be like if a whole variety of species lived and thrived on it; you read the websites; you talk to people, see what they've done. You don't know if it's possible, but you begin to imagine a different landscape. A little seed of faith appears.

Jesus says, "It doesn't have to be big. A mustard seed is a tiny package that holds the possibility of something bigger. It's enough." That's why at places like West Denmark, there's no litmus test for what you have to believe to come in the door or share life together. Like the disciples, we listen, sing, pray, read, serve, and eat together, and gradually we begin to trust the gospel vision, where small growing things aren't choked out, where color and variety have room to flourish. We begin to imagine the world in new ways.

But it takes more than vision to get rid of buckthorn. It also takes persistent, backbreaking, invisible, thankless work. Just like for living with each other, forgiving one another, creating communities where people are less likely to kill one another, creating systems where all God's creation thrives.

So, Jesus goes on, and we have to forgive his metaphor here. If you ever wondered whether Jesus was truly a person of his time and place, passages like this next parable will convince you. Language is tricky; metaphors always reflect culture, and they can always go off the rails. Like when people talk about buckthorn they always talk about invasive species, which need to be rooted out, so that the native plants can thrive. Which, in today's context sounds like an ICE raid, to deport the dangerous foreigners. Not where we want that metaphor to go. That's what happens to Jesus here. He seems to want to say, yes, you need to trust my vision, but that's not all there is to faith. There's also faithfulness, the daily work of building on what I started and rooting out whatever threatens it.

So, he launches into a story, set up like many of his parables. When Jesus opens a story with “Who among you...,” the answer is always, “Oh my gosh, no one would do that.” Who among you would leave their cow in the ditch on the sabbath? Noone. Who among you would let their sheep wander off without going to search for it? Noone.

So, it’s horrible to our ears when he says, “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from working outside, ‘Sit down. Let me serve you dinner?’ Noone! You’d expect the slave to fix you dinner! And would you thank him? No! He’s just doing his job. So, you, just do your job. Say, ‘We are worthless slaves. We have only done what we ought to have done.’”

Makes your skin crawl, right? Because of the legacy of slavery in our country, and the fact that there are many people whose work is literally never done; they go from one job to the next, to the next, only to wake up the next day to do it all again. It seems like the least we should do is say thank you and pay them fairly. If our model of faith is like that, an unremitting discharge of duty, in the face of impossible demands, no wonder the disciples were overwhelmed.

But there is something here, even though it’s an image that doesn’t travel well to our culture. Some scholars suggest that Jesus is trying to rile up the masses, by calling attention to their unfair working conditions (this is Jesus as Napheesa Collier, for you WNBA fans out there) – and to hint that in the coming kingdom, the relationships will be balanced out. Maybe. There’s a lot of buckthorn growing in our economic systems, for sure.

But, there is more. Jesus starts out imagining his audience as the masters, asking, “would *you* serve *your* slave,” but then he switches, and at the end, he asks us to imagine ourselves as the workers, faithfully doing the job, no matter how hard it is. For some reason, God chooses to make the seed grow, not on its own, but in partnership with God’s people in the relentless, boring, steady work that goes into any community, any relationship, any hillside. Jesus didn’t call his disciples away from work; he gave them new work to do, just as hard, but the work of restoration, toward a new earth. That’s what each of you do, making this community a place of joy, hope, and welcome. A million tiny acts of service. Maybe we occasionally say thank you. But you would just say, “Ah, it’s just part of the job.”

And of course, this parable, clunky as it is, points beyond itself, to right here, right now. Because Jesus, the one we should be serving, in the middle of the workday, the government at an impasse, the kitchen a mess, blood flowing everywhere, the buckthorn still resisting our every move; he invites us to sit down, eat, and be refreshed for the work ahead. He brings bread, wine, pumpkins, tomatoes, apples, and nuts, offers them to us. We gather at this table, and then we go next door, sharing everything we've made. After all, it's harvest fest. We eat with all the others around the world, who, working on their impossible tasks, also pause and are fortified. We remember we are all part of one household, where the work is endless but so is the love. We don't work alone. We go back and keep at it. And the one who is the source of faith, and from whom we learn what faithfulness looks like, gives us all we need.