

We want more!

It's one of the first things many toddlers learn to say—there's even a very well known baby-sign-language sign for "more." Teenaged boys (at least at my house!) always seem to want more: more dinner, more snacks, more screen time, more sleep. Concert-goers holler out "we want more" (or perhaps its more refined cousin "encore") calling the performers back to the stage. "Bigger, Better, More," could be the slogan for any number of companies and organizations, even some churches I know. Do you remember that AT&T commercial a few years back, with the guy sitting on the floor talking with a bunch of kindergartener? The tag line, spoken by one of the kids is "We want more, we want more. We like it and we want more!" Human nature, or at least in our modern Western culture, seems to be hardwired for always wanting more.

We hear it right here in the church, don't we? Perhaps we always have, but it seems a bit more pronounced these days. "We want more." "We need more." More butts in the pews, more bucks in the offering plates. We need more members—new people, subs, folks who can come and take over our jobs on committees and councils, take up our place in the choir, do the things we've always done, (the way we've done them, of course). If only we had more young families joining up, some folks among us might say, that would start to turn things around, bring it back to how our church used to be. If only we had more programs, some others might say, more staff, more things presented to us, more deliverables, more consumables, that would sure make us competitive again, even in this quickly changing church market. If only we just had more time, yet others among us might say. More time to do all the things we want and need to do, more time to just relax and unplug from all the things we're doing now. If only we had more space to just be, instead of yet another Sunday morning or Wednesday evening crammed with stuff we have to show up for, stuff we have to do. If only we had more commitment, more tithers, more doers, more options, more bible studies, more online resources. If only we had more.

Not even Jesus' disciples are immune to this human desire for more. "Increase our faith!" they say to Jesus, which could be understood to mean "we want more faith." And while that request, that demand seems to come out of nowhere the way The Revised Common Lectionary has clipped this particular passage, in the larger context of this chapter it actually seems to come as a response to Jesus urging them to keep on in spite of obstacles, warning them not to be an obstacle to others, and then admonishing them to keep on forgiving even the very people who are themselves obstacles, forgiving them each and every time to repent of their wrong-doing. It's in this context of Jesus telling them they have to do this hard thing that they shout out "We need more faith, Jesus" And while a request for an increase in faith certainly sounds more admirable than, say, somebody asking for more snacks or screen time, programs or projects, even this could be construed as another never-ending plea for more.

As usual, Jesus has an interesting response to their demand for more faith. "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed," he said, "you could say to this great big mulberry tree,

'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." Over the years, some have heard these words to be scolding to the disciples, focusing on the word "if," turning it even into an "if only." If only you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you *could* do this hard thing, this seemingly impossible thing. Read through the lens of scarcity, as we too often do, we start to wonder if our limited faith is holding us back, keeping us from doing the things we know we need to do, the things we even feel called to do. We could easily be those disciples demanding that Jesus increase our faith—especially when faced with a task that seems so daunting.

But read in another way, as an almost knee-jerk reaction to Jesus telling them that they are being called to do this hard work of persisting in spite of the obstacles, of loving the unlovable, of constantly forgiving repeat offenders, Jesus's response seems not so much to be saying to them that they are *lacking* in faith, but rather that they already have the faith they seek. Seen through a lens of sufficiency and even abundance, Jesus' words are much less "O ye of little faith," and more "you got this. You can do this hard thing." "Even with the faith you already have, small though it may seem, you can already do amazing, remarkable things." Or as the angel said to Jesus' mother, Mary, a full generation earlier, "nothing will be impossible for God."

At our text study this past Wednesday, one of the participants said that this Mustard Seed saying of Jesus is actually the perfect gospel text for baptism. I think he was right. Jesus says that even a faith that seems to us to be small—the size of the smallest thing we can think of—even that faith is capable to doing miraculous, marvelous things. Elsewhere in the bible, there are two slightly different versions of this story. In the first, Jesus says that although the mustard seed is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. And in the second, a little closer to our reading for today, he says that with faith the size of a mustard seed you could literally move a mountain. I think both of these, together with the one we read today about uprooting the tree and planting it in the sea, are all great images for baptism.

Some have said that in baptism a seed of faith is planted. We can imagine that seed of faith like that little mustard seed I showed some of you earlier this morning—maybe some botanists among us might let us know if this is still true or not, but back in Jesus' day, the mustard seed was thought to be the smallest of all seed. So this tiny little seed of faith gets planted in Shermelia, Tarlee, and Ishmael in just a few minutes, and in Zachary and Bo a couple of hours later. Each of you being baptized, along with your parents and sponsors, promise to tend this seed of faith as it starts to take root and grow—and actually the entire congregation, all of Christ the King Lutheran Church gathered today, and speaking on behalf of the entire people of God everywhere in the whole world promises to help out, too. So while this is an exciting day for each of you being baptized today, it's a special day for all of us, too, as we walk along side each of you, witnessing the growth of your faith, helping out along the way as God give us the opportunity. We can't wait to see what you each will become—how that seed of faith planted in each of you will bloom and grow, and how all of us will grow and change as a result of it. I hope you all realize what a gift this is to be able to accompany these children and young people among us as God gives growth to their faith.

But baptism isn't just the planting of a seed of faith. It is also a sign of belonging—to God and to each other. The waters of baptism signal that belonging the very moment they are offered, and water continues to signal that belonging every time that we renew our baptismal promises, as we did at the start of the service today. Through baptism, we know that we belong to God and to each other—and even if we have to be reminded of it over and over in our life time (or even several times a day)

Baptism is also a quite literally a bath—a cleansing of our broken selves, as God washes all our sins away, bathing us not only in water but also, as Martin Luther says, the word of God which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts such word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is simple water and no baptism. But with the word of God it is a baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit. And while it is the word of God and a trusting faith that makes this water a baptism, I wonder sometimes if we as Lutherans don't use typically use quite enough water to get this point across. And maybe we tried to compensate for that this morning moving from a sprinkling to a dousing in remembrance of our baptism.

Because baptism is also the dying of our sinful selves and being raised to new life by the power of Christ's resurrection. That might sound a bit daunting, a bit overwhelming, even, for infants, children and adults alike. But that is where the collective faith of the church comes in. That's where our promises to you come in—along with the promises your parents and sponsors make, all of which depend on the promises that God makes to us all. In the overwhelmingness of the realities that lie ahead for each of you—each of us—who are baptized, the church gets to say to you something like this line by writer Frederick Buechner “Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.”¹

Baptism is a lot of things all at once: dying and rising with Christ, being bathed in God's grace and mercy, belonging to God's great big extended family and this little part of it called Christ the King. And the planting of the seed of faith, a seed that will grow and deepen and sprout and bloom and become as big as a big fat tree and empower you and us all to shelter others and offer hospitality and encourage growth in others and to uproot some trees and replant some others and, yes, to even move mountains. That is the gift of faith we receive being baptized in the name of the father, and of the son and other the holy spirit.

How much faith is enough? It seems to me that the better question might be “in whom shall we put our faith” rather than “how much faith.” Jesus calls us to put our faith in him, and that even with our puny little faith, as small as the smallest thing we can imagine, as long as that faith is in the living God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do more—much more, even—than we'd ever dreamed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*.