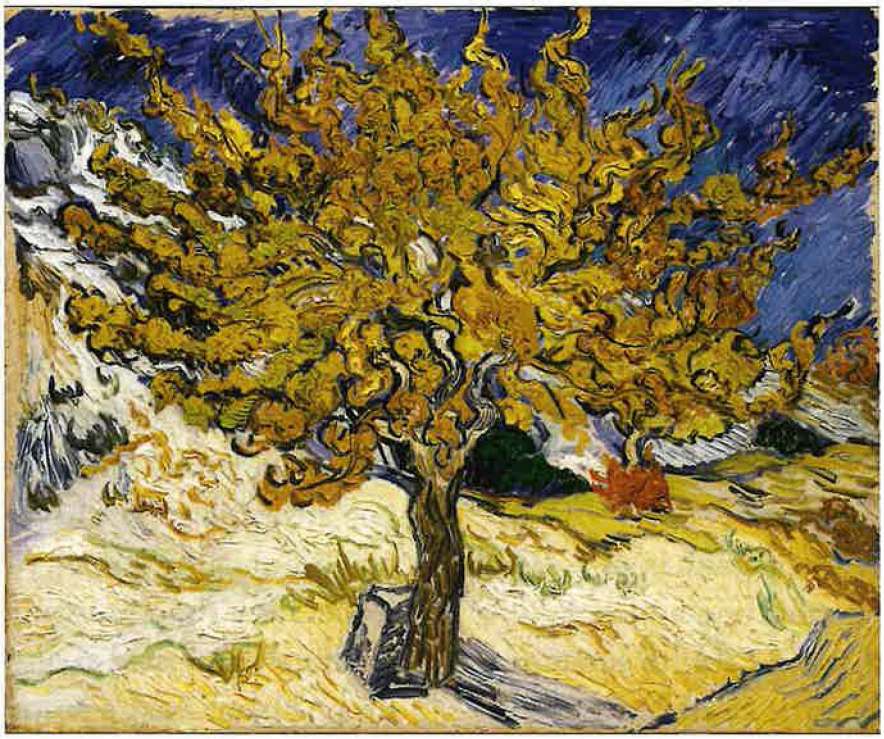
Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 5, 2025

Enough Faith

Lamentations 1:1-6; Lamentations 3:19-26; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10



The Mulberry Tree (Vincent van Gogh, 1889)

[Luke 17:5-10] *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" 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.*

"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'? 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'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 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!'"

"Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here." We say these words every Sunday at St. Stephen's, as we begin the Eucharist. They name one of our deepest values — hospitality — the conviction that all are welcome in this place, in this community, and at the table.

But what is a journey of faith? And what does it mean to have faith, anyway?

For many people since the Enlightenment, to "have faith" has meant "to believe in God" — as if faith were mostly an idea, a thought we hold in our heads. This makes faith almost entirely cognitive and propositional, the ability imagine or feel that God exists, or to affirm a creed or doctrine of the church.

In this understanding, faith is an individual intellectual or emotional experience. If you are able to summon a sense of God more clearly or readily than I can, then some might say your faith is stronger than mine.

But with that understanding of faith comes the inevitable "crisis of faith," the moment when our minds falter and God's presence is hard to imagine. When our hearts are broken or grieving or outraged and we cannot feel a thing. We say, "I've lost my faith. I can't imagine God is present in this messed-up world."

But God doesn't cease to exist because we can't conjure up sensation of the divine. And faith is not dead "just because our imagination and heart have run dry. God exists independent of our perception. Faith must be something deeper, not an act of will but a habit of the heart,[1] a stance toward life. Perhaps faith is a practice – one of turning toward the love of God and learning to trust that love. An individual practice, and a collective one, too.

Today's readings are pointing to this deeper understanding of faith, but if you are alarmed by what you thought you heard in the gospel, you are not alone. It's a short passage, two seemingly unrelated sayings of Jesus, dropped into Luke's gospel with little context. We hear the apostles beg Jesus, "Increase our faith!" And Jesus replies, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could command this mulberry tree to uproot itself and be planted in the sea."

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[1] Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern*.

Well, we know a mustard seed is tiny, so it's easy to hear Jesus' statement as judgmental – "You people with your puny faith are a real disappointment." That critical tone seems to be underscored by the rest of the reading – the troubling parable of the worthless slaves, a cringe-worthy phrase if there ever was one. And depending on how they are interpreted, these two sayings of Jesus can discourage and misdirect people on their spiritual journey.

The first saying about the mulberry tree seems to imply that if a person's faith is big enough, they can do the impossible. So, if life deals you a lousy hand – cancer that won't go into remission, a job loss that threatens your family's stability, it must be your fault. Your faith is too small to make it all disappear.

The second saying seems to imply that unjust relationships are divinely ordained. Those who are made subservient by oppression should just suck it up and get back to work. There is a shameful history of preachers who used this tiny passage to justify slavery, subjugate women and people of color, and maintain an unjust power structure.

But these interpretations miss the mark. They don't reflect the life Jesus lived or the love he taught.

And there is good news about faith in this gospel. It is hiding in plain sight. Rather than judging the apostles for having too little faith, Jesus responds with love and reassurance: "You don't need more faith. Even the tiniest seed is enough." You have what you need. It is enough, I promise.

We don't measure faith because we don't manufacture it ourselves. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, planted in each person, generation after generation. It only needs to be kindled, to feed our spirit "not of cowardice, but of power and love and self-discipline." The early church understood that. We heard it today in the letter to Timothy.

We are hard-wired for faith because God dwells in us – and we dwell in God – from our first moment of being. As Richard Rohr says[2], "It is God in you that loves God. It's Christ in you that recognizes Christ. It's the Holy Spirit, whose temple you are, that responds to the Holy Spirit. Like recognizes like."

[2] Richard Rohr, "Faith as Participation," April 10, 2016.

So the journey of faith is the life-long practice of recognition – noticing the holy around us and turning toward it, so it can stir up the holy within us. That recognition happens not so much when we strive or study or add something to ourselves, but when we do the opposite. We subtract; we let go of the things that dull our perception – our fears of inadequacy, our attachment to self-image, our need to be in control.

The journey of faith is tied up with our human journey of self-discovery and learning to love, where we form relationships and make meaning of the complexity of our existence. As we move through life, seeking truth and love which point to the holy mystery of the divine, we learn that a mature faith is not about certitude, because God cannot be fully imagined or comprehended and that's not the point anyway.

Faith is about learning to live with ambiguities and paradoxes. About embracing the unknowability of the future as well as other people's inner landscapes. And faith includes the ability to examine and question our convictions, assumptions and prejudices, not because we are searching for the one "right" set of beliefs, but because the searching itself deepens our bond with God and with each other.

The life of faith is not an individual, private affair, but one which is informed and nurtured by all the relationships of our lives. Which is why this community is so important.

Each of us brings our experiences of holy mystery, our wonderings and longings that shape who we are and what we hope for. In community, we share each other's burdens and joys and help hold the unanswerable questions. Each of our paths is steadier and better lit when we walk them together.

Which is why we insist:

Wherever you are on this journey of faith, you are welcome here.

Amen.