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⁵The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" ⁶The 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.

⁷Who 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'? ⁸Would 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'? ⁹Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? ¹⁰So 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!' — Luke 17:5-10

As odd as it may seem, I'd like to talk with you for a moment about mustard. Leonard Sweet, who is an author and seminary professor, got me thinking about this.

All mustard is made in relatively the same way. The seed must be crushed, its hull and bran sifted out or not depending on the type of mustard being made. It then may or may not go through further grinding and crushing. A liquid like water, wine, vinegar, beer, or a combination of several of these liquids is added, along with seasonings. The mustard is mixed, sometimes simmered, and then cooled. Some mustard is aged in large containers before it is bottled and shipped to stores and customers.

The first recipe for mustard appeared as early as 42 CE, but the use of mustard as a condiment didn't come until much later.

Long before scientific discoveries revealed how our bodies work and before things like penicillin or even aspirin were available, a lot of natural cures --- we sometimes call them homeopathic today --- natural cures were prescribed. Headache sufferers were told to chew wintergreen leaves, for example. One of the most popular and widely used cures was an old fashioned mustard plaster.

It seems that what you did was mix mustard with flour and slather it onto a moistened cloth. Sometimes the mustard plaster was made with dry mustard and water or mustard flour and water. The plaster was then put on the patient's skin to help drive out whatever was making them sick.

Mustard plasters could be applied to the stomach, back, chest, stiff and sore joints, and the head. The way it worked was that the mustard would increase the blood supply to the affected area, allowing the body to work more efficiently at carrying away toxins, speeding digestion, easing sore muscles, and generally accelerating the body's own healing abilities.

Today we don't usually give mustard much thought. For us, it is a common, everyday, ordinary ingredient that we never think twice about.

But Jesus saw it differently. Jesus knew better. For Jesus, mustard seeds presented a picture of the kingdom of God and the faith of those who would be a part of God's kingdom.

I don't think that it was an accident that Jesus picks the mustard seed in his example of faithfulness in this gospel. Its reputation for being a small seed creates a wonderful image of the kingdom of God and its growth into a large-size bush. One acre of mustard plants produces enough seed to produce more than 47,000 jars of mustard.

But there were seeds smaller in Jesus' culture and there were certainly trees which were known to be larger than the mustard shrub. Both the oak and the cedar were bigger. Jesus could have compared the acorn or the cone to a small faith that achieves great things.

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus tells us that we are to be salt to the world...that we are to bring zing and zest to the lives of others through our dealings with them. That's also true of mustard, whose seed Jesus says is our seed of faith.

Mustard is alive, bursting with flavor and color. Mustard is never lukewarm or neutral.

Even from the time of Jesus, it was known to be an irritant, something fiery and biting, stirring up the blood. When Darius, the king of the Persians, invaded Europe with a great army he was met by Alexander the Great. Darius sent Alexander a bag of sesame seed as a kind of taunt, indicating by the number of these small seeds the vast multitude of soldiers he had at his command. When Alexander received it he sent back by the same messenger a bag of mustard seed which was a way of saying, "You may be many, but we're tough and biting and pungent. We can handle you." And they did.

The apostles have the wrong thing in mind when they ask Jesus to increase their faith. Faith is not about quantity. It is really about quality. Faith is not about size. It is about spice. It is about living it out.

The tiny mustard seed reveals its strength. When it is bitten into...it bites back!

The disciples ask Jesus to "increase our faith!" We might be tempted to do the same thing at times. We read about tragedies around the world and we experience them ourselves – whether it is illness, grief, depression, economic hardship, or something else. We sometimes waver in our faith, especially when things are confusing or changing or chaotic.

Jesus' response to what is a very straightforward request – one we might make ourselves – is somewhat surprising. He says, "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." Since most of us have probably never told a mountain to move and had it obey, this seems like this is a strange exaggeration. It doesn't seem very helpful.

But maybe it is helpful. Maybe what Jesus is saying is that the amount of faith isn't what matters. Sometimes we compare ourselves to others. We think to ourselves, "If only I had faith like him". Or we think "She is so faithful; she does so many things for the church". We start to think that faith is all about us or about what we do or don't do.

But that isn't what faith is all about. As Pastor Jay McDivitt has said, "Faith is the hope that God has planted in us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Faith is the trust that God didn't just create the world – and occasionally shows up to fix things when we ask for help – but rather, God is turning the whole world upside down and inside out. God is the one moving mountains, destroying death, forgiving sin, healing divisions, and changing lives. Faith is the gift God gives us to see that 'this is most certainly true' and the encouragement to tell the world about what we have seen."

Having faith that God has not abandoned the world but is actively working in it means that we will see, live, and talk differently. It means that we will realize that there is more than meets the eye – that God is at work and because of that there is hope and meaning and future for us and for all God's creation. Christian faith is a gift from God and we have to practice seeing, speaking, and living that faith. It takes practice and practice takes patience and time.

Jesus' choice of the mustard seed points to a quality of faith that we should not forget. Mustard is not meant to be eaten alone. It is at its best when it is with something else. For example, hot dogs and mustard just seem to go together.

Those who have faith are not meant to go at it alone either. We are called and gathered by the Holy Spirit to be a part of the community of faith...to be a part of the church. You can't fully appreciate mustard unless you are eating it on something else. You can't fully exercise your faith unless you are part of the community of faith.

There are many things that I can't do as an individual Christian. I can't afford to send a missionary anywhere to spread the gospel, but together we can. I can't offer a preschool to young families by myself, but together we can. Faith is not meant to be a solitary experience, but it is meant to be experienced in community.

In the reading from 2 Timothy, we are reminded that the message of faith has been given to us by those who have gone before us. We read in 2 Timothy: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you...Guide the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us."

Through the gift of Holy Baptism and the Holy Spirit, we have living in us the same faith that was given to our parents, our grandparents, and all who have gone before us. It is ours to live, to grow in, and to pass on to those who come after us. Since we "rely on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to God's own purpose and grace" we know that whatever we do with this gift, God will keep on giving it to us.

Jesus said that we are to be salt and light to the world.

And mustard. Don't forget the mustard!

Amen.