

## **“Day by Day”**

Reverend Mary Gause  
Overbrook Presbyterian Church  
26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
September 30, 2018

### **Psalm 16 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup>Protect me, O God, for in You I take refuge. <sup>2</sup>I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from You.” <sup>3</sup>As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight. <sup>4</sup>Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. <sup>5</sup>The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; You hold my lot. <sup>6</sup>The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage. <sup>7</sup>I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. <sup>8</sup>I keep the Lord always before me; because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. <sup>9</sup>Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. <sup>10</sup>For You do not give me up to Sheol, or let Your faithful one see the Pit. <sup>11</sup>You show me the path of life. In Your presence there is fullness of joy; in Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

### **Matthew 17:14-20**

“When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

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The musical, [Godspell](#), originated in 1970 at Carnegie Mellon University as a theatre project. Over the years it grew and grew until it was a Tony nominated musical that continues in revivals on Broadway today. The story blends the gospel accounts of several parables and connects them with catchy and moving music. And if you were in a youth choir in a church in the 70’s or 80’s you likely sang one or more of the musical numbers from [Godspell](#). And you know you are a child or teenage or adult of that period if you saw my sermon title ... and started singing:

Day by day,  
Dear Lord, of thee three things I pray:  
To see thee more clearly,  
Love thee more dearly,  
Follow thee more nearly,  
Day by day.<sup>[3]</sup>

This very simple song contains such a simple and yet profound message. Three simple words that sums up what rests at the heart of our gospel passage for today.

Jesus has been with the disciples now for 13 chapters – that translates into a long time for us. For 13 chapters, the disciples have walked with Jesus and learned from Him through His Sermon on the Mount; they have watched Him still storms and heal people, they have heard the teachings of His many parables; they have watched Him walk on water and feed 5000 people with just five loaves and two fish, and they have been introduced to the reality that Jesus truly is God’s Son – something they continue to struggle to wrap their heads around – but they do know He is something special. Jesus has spent 13 chapters teaching, and preaching, and building the confidence and faith in His charges, preparing them for life without Him. And despite His many attempts, they continue to waffle back and forth between – He is the son of God and is He the son of God? Shown in today’s Scripture: A father has brought his epileptic son to be healed by Jesus’ disciples...but the disciples, try as they might, can’t do it. And so that same father, in his desperate and fearful state, he begs Jesus to do what his disciples could not – heal his son. And with a bit of grumbling, Jesus heals his son.

Later, the disciples come forward struggling to understand why they couldn’t do what Jesus has told them they were ready to do. Jesus’ response is to tell them they have little faith and what they need is faith the size of a mustard seed.

Clearly, we need more translation here. Because we all know that seeds are tiny. Sunday school teaches us that the mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds. So why would Jesus suggest the disciples have too little faith and then explain they need faith the size of a tiny seed about the size of a pin head?

The little faith Jesus talks about is the faith that has lost its confidence in God’s promise and power. It is faith that is well intended but cannot be sustained. It starts off strong and powerful but often trails off into a whisper. It is easily overwhelmed by the world. As theologian Tom Long says about little faith:

“The poor are too many, the disease seems always to have the last word, the trips to the cemetery are too frequent, the unjust are too strong and the roots of evil too deep. The gospel appears too little to go on, disciples too few to make a difference, and trying to follow Jesus in this kind of world begins to seem like bailing out the ocean with a leaky bucket. Little faith moves from distraction, to despair, and finally to defeat. The world is the way it is and that’s that.”

Mustard seed faith is also small. It, too, is surrounded by troubles. But, it rests its hope in the victory of God. It looks small when planted in the soil. But, the gardener (that’s us) knows that with God’s help, it will grow into a massive shrub. Mustard-seed faith is the faith that even though compassion and mercy seem overwhelmed by a horribly cruel world, what is done in Christ’s name really counts and that God’s saving purpose will ultimately prevail over all that opposes it.<sup>1</sup>

Mustard seed faith doesn't mean everything will be easy ... but, it means everything that we do as disciples genuinely matters to God and somehow God will use it to bring about the kingdom into the world. The faith Jesus calls the disciples to have is just that - they may not see the fruition of their actions, but, trust in the ultimate power of God that the gift of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit is present in actions molding them, using them and connecting them together to bring about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' explanation of faith tells the disciples that we must root and cement our faith in the belief that God – somehow in some mysterious way that we may never know – will work in and through and in spite of the ugliness in our world to bring about the kingdom. Yet another place with the gospel message brings comfort and challenge - comfort that God ultimately prevails. Comfort in knowing God chooses us to be a part of that kingdom making. Comfort in knowing we don't do it, but God does it through us. But the challenge of doing our part – well that's another story.

This week, my goodness let's be honest, this year has been one full of "little faith" moments. Who among us has not found ourselves depleted by the happenings of our world? Our hearts are ripped apart every time we hear of yet another school or workplace shooting; too many reports of sexual abuse of children, women and even men move us; most news – democratic, republican, or independent out of Washington, D.C. sends our blood pressure soaring; and also many weather-related issues – hurricanes, typhoons, flooding, tornadoes, earthquakes all fill us with worry and compassion. Add to these our own family issues of grief, parenting, aging, medical issues, and, well . . . just life, and it is so very overwhelming. How do we not get distracted by the world and end-up in a spiral of hopelessness?

In her blog "A String of Hope", author Connie Schultz tells this story:

Between 1942 and 1945, the United States government forced about 120,000 people into internment camps on American soil. Their only crime was to be Japanese-Americans during World War II. They lost their homes and their jobs, and virtually all of their material possessions. They were ripped from their lives and herded into nearly a dozen camps, with no idea how long they would be imprisoned or if they would ever again be free.

In 1942, 22-year-old Toshiye Morita was sent to an internment camp in Topaz, Utah, along with her parents and six siblings. This particular camp was built on an ancient lakebed, where thousands of seashells remained. They were the detritus of a lake that no longer existed, but to young women like Morita, they were found treasures. During her three years in the camp, Morita collected hundreds of tiny shells to string together. It was a painstaking process. She matched the shells in size and shape and lacquered each with nail polish before threading them one at a time.

During her three years in the camp, Toshiye Morita made three necklaces from the shells. Her son, Michael F. Ozaki, discovered them only after she had died, at age 94. She had secreted them away in one of the two suitcases she had packed with evidence of her incarceration and labeled: "Don't Throw Away." Along with the necklaces, Ozaki found photos of his mother and her family

on the day they were released in 1945, and a small plastic ID badge that had allowed her to work in the field. Michael, a retired pediatrician in California, said his mother had always refused to discuss her years in the camp. "Couldn't be helped," was all she would say, in Japanese.

The necklace contains 264 white shells which are the size of lupine seeds. "You can see how hard she worked on it," he said. "How she found all the shells in the exact same size and painted them to match."

In the midst of such horror and uncertainty, his mother made this thing of beauty. I look at the necklace and marvel at her resolve. I touch the delicate shells and feel her courage. For what is hope if not an act of bravery, a refusal to surrender when the world is closing in. <sup>ii</sup>

How do we keep the hope and courage in our world? We start by coming to worship by making worship a priority. We come to remember who we worship and why we worship. To be reminded that God calls us, not alone, but together into a community. We come to be reminded of God's amazing, unconditional love that surrounds us. We come to be reminded that God is the one in control. We come to be grounded again and again in the knowledge God is working in our world and then we go forth and look for those ways, and we see them in the small intentional actions of hope and courage that are all around us:

- From the middle schooler who stands up to his own friends and tells them that their classmate who happens to be autistic, CAN sit at their table even though it means their best friend will have to sit elsewhere.
- For the young teacher who noticed that teenagers were struggling to find money for shampoo, deodorant, feminine products and shaving supplies...so they worked with local schools, stores and organizations to set up "drugstore closets" within the school itself and allow students to come gather the hygiene supplies they so desperately need.
- And the woman who has led and continues to lead the charge on organizing multiple churches and community organizations to collect hundreds upon hundreds of coats for multiple preschool, elementary, middle and high schools in areas of need in our very own city!

Step by step and day by day, we remember the God who loves us and then we put one foot in front of the other, and we move. Maybe we...

- pray for those who are hurting or even for those who are doing the hurting in the first place.
- speak up when our friends use racist or sexist language.
- get out and vote.
- go into the city to serve in the very places we wouldn't live.
- tell the truth about someone even when we know there are people who won't believe us.
- are kind to the person who is bagging our groceries at the supermarket.
- don't snap at the telemarketer who is doing a job in hopes of feeding their family.
- And for some of us, it may mean having the courage to just get out of our house in the first place.

As Christians, we respond to the hurt and anger and ugliness of this world by refusing to surrender. We remember that what we do, we do not do alone, but that the Holy Spirit is present walking with us, filling us with the courage and bravery we need to act. We remember that we are called again and again and again to remember God's saving grace and unconditional love that fills us with hope and empowers us to be able to be courageous and brave and to know that somehow, in some way, God is working through all of our actions to bring about the kingdom where hurt and anger and ugliness are no more.

I know there are days when these words are hard to hear and when you and I will find ourselves in the place of the disciples saying, "Why doesn't it work?" It may be helpful to remember these words of Mary Anne Radmacher – "Courage does not always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, 'I will try again tomorrow.'"<sup>iii</sup> How do we have faith like a mustard seed? Day by day by day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Long, Tom. Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew 17:14-21 Westminster-John Knox press, 1997. Pp.196-98.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.creators.com/read/connie-schultz/09/18/a-string-of-hope>

<sup>iii</sup>

<https://www.google.com/search?q=who+said+courage+doesn%27t+always+roar&oq=who+said+courage+doesn&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l2.4202j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>