

Luke 17:1-10, Lamentations 1:1-6

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I feel like we've lost a lot over the last few years. You all know that I lost my mother a few months ago. That became especially poignant to me a couple of days ago when the Jackson Perkins Christmas catalog started arriving. Years ago we received a Christmas amaryllis from Ron Teall. He would send us one every year for more than 20 years and Erin always looked forward to it. About 10 years ago we decided to do the same by sending an amaryllis to each of our parents and since that meant four different households, it was quick Christmas shopping. Then Ron passed away earlier this year. And only one of our parents is left with us now and he's in the hospital this morning and we're realizing how much our life has changed over the last few years. And that true here at the church too. Especially today I'm disappointed not to have Carol here to help me in worship because every Sunday I feel the empty chair next to me up here that Murray used to sit in. Murray wouldn't always do a lot, pronounce the Assurance of Pardon and a few other things, but there was no one more affirming and encouraging than Murray. When I would sit down after preaching, you'd think every sermon I delivered was the best he had ever heard, and he would pat me on the arm like an older brother and say, "that was just great." But then I look out at you all. And I look forward to the fall and to the holidays.

And that's when I think about what I do have. And I don't do that enough. I spend a lot of time thinking about what I don't have. In our family, in our church, in our country. Jeremiah does that in the reading from Lamentations. But we all do that, don't we? Focus on what we don't have?

That's what happens to the disciples in this passage from Luke. Right before the section we read, Jesus says to his disciples, "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and

turns back to you seven times and says, "I repent," you must forgive." That when the apostles turn to him and say, "Increase our faith!" Which is probably a nice way of saying, "No way! We can't do that! That's too hard. Who can do something like that? We'd have to be saint to do that. If that's what you want, you'd better increase our faith." Forgive seven times in the same day? How crazy is that? Could you do that? Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been asked to do something that you are just not equipped to do? Have you ever felt like you might be able to do it if you had enough faith? Like forgive someone? "I just can't forgive her. I guess I'm just not a big enough person." "Teach Sunday School? Me? Never. I don't know enough, no one wants to hear what I have to say." "Serve as a deacon? No way? Those are people who really believe, I mean they believe enough to sit and pray with someone, I could never do that." "Help with the youth. I couldn't. Those kids get so out of control and I wouldn't know what to do." "Give money to the church, make a pledge? But I'm not sure what my income will be next year, how can I pledge an amount when I don't know what I'll have?" That's when we hear the voice of Jesus say, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed . . ." The point of this story is that you do have faith. God has given you everything you need to be a disciple. You don't have enough faith, enough skill, enough talent, enough energy? God asks that we take what we do have, and let him use it. God has given us everything we need to be his disciple. He only asks that we think not about what we do not have, but what we do have.

Parker Palmer once said, "I remember talking with a friend who has worked for many years at the Catholic Worker, a ministry to the poor in New York City. Daily she tries to respond to waves of human misery that are as ceaseless as surf in that community. Out of my deep not-knowing I asked how she could keep doing a work that never showed any results, a work in which the problems keep getting worse instead of better. I will never forget her enigmatic answer: 'The thing you don't understand, Parker, is that just because something is impossible doesn't mean you shouldn't do it!'" Exactly. Not what we do not have, but what we do have. In the church do we stress about what we do

not have? No enough money, not enough space, not enough time, not enough energy, not enough people, not enough, not enough; and so our temptation is then to do nothing. What do we do when we don't have enough youth? One or two kids coming isn't enough. We should just give up, right. Or we take what seems like just a mustard seed and we give it to God and we look around and see a different way. And it's amazing what God can do. Because in the end, that's the point—what God can do. This is not about our efforts, it is God working through us. That's where we were with our youth four or five years ago. We just had a couple of kids. Now we have 25-30 every week and we send 19 or 20 on a mission trip every summer. All because God took what we did have and helped us see it as a mustard seed that might grow into something unexpected. Part of it was seeing things differently, and seeing that they are all our kids.

This old story maybe especially appropriate this year:

There was a woman who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart and all sorts of good things, but she was very frustrated. The world seemed to be falling apart. She would read the papers and get depressed. One day she decided to go shopping, and she went into a mall and picked a store at random. She walked in and was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter. She knew it was Jesus, because he looked just like the pictures she'd see on holy cards and devotional pictures. She looked again and again at him, and finally she got up her nerve and asked, "Excuse me, are you Jesus?" "I am." "Do you work here?" "No," Jesus said, "I own the store." "Oh, what do you sell in here?" "Oh, just about anything!" "Anything?" "Yeah, anything you want. What is it that you want?" She said, "I don't know." "Well," Jesus said, "feel free, walk up and down the aisles, make a list, see what it is you want, then come back and we'll see what we can do for you."

She did just that, walked up and down the aisles. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty, peace in families, no more drugs, harmony, clean air, careful use of resources. She wrote furiously. By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list. Jesus took the list, skimmed

through it, looked up at her and smiled. “No problem.” And then he bent down behind the counter and picked out all sorts of things, stood up, and laid out the packets. She asked, “What are these?” Jesus replied, “Seed packets. This is a catalog store.” She said, “You mean I don't get the finished product?” “No, this is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. You plant the seeds. You go home and nurture them and help them grow and someone else reaps the benefits.” “Oh . . .” she said. And she left the store without buying anything.

That's what we do here. We have all those things—thriving church, peace in families, strong discipleship, effective mission work, great youth programs, joyful fellowship, healing wounds, seniors sharing their wisdom with younger generations, uplifting worship. There are all right here. Some are growing around us right now. Some are still seeds. We just need to make sure we are planting them, watering them. We work with what we have, not what we don't have. But we get to watch them grow!