**20 Pentecost**

**October 2, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

When I was a youngster … in the third or fourth grade … there was a girl who lived down the street named Nancy. Nancy was what we called then a Tomboy who wore jeans and a t-shirt and rode bikes with us to the railroad tracks, and to the fort we built in the woods, and even climbed down into the unused storm drains in the unfinished housing development we lived in. Nancy’s family attended the same church as my family … I think it was a Congregational Church … and on Sunday Nancy would show up in a dress … and she even wore a necklace. The necklace was a gold chain with a little glass globe with something in the glass. One Sunday I asked her what was in the glass and she told me it was a mustard seed. I said, “Why?” And she said, “I don’t know, but my grandmother gave it to my mother before she died, and my mother gave it to me … it has something to do with the Bible.”

At the time my father was working in New York City and we lived on Long Island. He was transferred to North Carolina and after five years he was transferred back to New York City and we moved back to the same town we had lived in before. Nancy was now a classmate of mine in junior high school.

I saw her in the halls one day, and she was wearing the necklace. No longer a “Tomboy” it was an awkward teenage conversation, but she told me that her older brother had died after a long illness, and that her parents had divorced and she was living with her dad. I mentioned that I remembered her necklace, and she said, “It reminds me of my mother … and it has helped me through some tough times.” I still didn’t know much about the Jesus story of the mustard seed, but I began to understand why Nancy wore the necklace.

The lesson from Lamentations we read this morning is about hardship and faith. Jerusalem has been overrun and its inhabitants exiled to Babylon.

“The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals; all her gates are desolate, her priests groan; her young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.”

If ever there were a lesson to respond with “Amen. Amen” instead of “Thanks be to God” this is it.

We may not be exiled to Babylon, but many of us have known “tough times.” Many of us have faced life-threatening or chronic, debilitating illness in ourselves or in our family. Some of us have felt the grief of the death of someone we loved. A number of people we know have lost their livelihood, or a significant part of their retirement savings. Some of our sons and daughters … or grandsons or granddaughters … have followed the wrong path and led the entire family into highly anxious times. And marriages … intended to be a life-long union … have fallen apart. These “tough times” have tested our faith. So where is a loving God in the midst of all this pain?

*“The apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” Jesus 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.”*

I don’t know if mulberry trees grow in Florida, but they do grow in Ohio and Massachusetts where Caren and I lived before we came to St. Augustine. Mulberry trees are insidious, and they are almost impossible to get rid of. Their roots get in sewer lines and buckle concrete sidewalks, and new mulberry tree shoots pop up sometimes twenty and thirty feet away from the trunk of the tree. In one case I had the stump of a rather large mulberry tree sending up shoots five years after it was cut down and ground up! I know … getting rid of a mulberry tree is no easy task.

Obviously, at least to us who do not necessarily read the Bible literally, the mere idea of commanding an inanimate object like a mulberry tree to do anything, much less uproot itself and throw itself into the sea is just hyperbolic language … an exaggeration. But it gets the point across. It doesn’t take much faith at all for that faith to be enough … and maybe more than enough.

Since we are on the subject of botany, let me tell you about the mustard plant. Even in Jesus’ time they knew that it was invasive. Pliny the Elder wrote *A Natural History* that was published just 30 to 40 years after Jesus’ death. In this very early scientific treatise he wrote:

"mustard… is extremely beneficial for the health. It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted: but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.”

It is thought that the plant that Jesus, and Pliny the Elder, refers to is “black” mustard which grows up to nine feet tall.

Indeed, if faith is like a mustard seed, let’s read Pliny the Elder’s description as if it were of “faith” instead of mustard.

“[Faith] is extremely beneficial for the health. [Faith] grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted; but on the other hand when [faith] has been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed [of faith] germinates at once.”

I wonder, is that your experience of faith? For me, at least in some cases, it is my experience. For example, just being here at St. Cyprian’s was like that for me. After some tough times just a little bit of faith was still enough to get me through.

Many of you have heard this story before … or at least parts of it. But in this context I think it is worth repeating. In 2007, just before Caren and I moved to St. Augustine, I was serving as a long-term interim rector of a highly conflicted parish on the campus of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. My mother lived in Asheville, North Carolina and she suffered from COPD … Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. Just before Easter of that year she was hospitalized with pneumonia, a real danger for people with COPD. After she was discharged from the hospital Caren and I drove down from western Massachusetts to Asheville.

My mother lived just two houses away from my sister Jane, and three houses away from my sister Susan. At night my sisters would listening to a baby monitor in my mother’s room so they could hear her if she needed any help. Well, when Caren and I arrive, it became my turn take some of the responsibilities off my sisters.

Caren and I stayed in an apartment in the basement of my mother’s house, and through the night I listened on the baby monitor as my mother breathed … and at times coughed. I didn’t sleep well that night, and at one time I awoke from a half-sleep and didn’t hear her breathing. I became concerned, then panicky as I pulled on my pants … then I heard the toilet flush in the background … it was a false alarm!

But as I lay there in the dark listening to my mother breathe I remembered that the Hebrew word for “breath” is the same word that is used for “wind” and “spirit.” I was listening not only to my mother’s breath, but I was listening to her spirit … and God’s spirit calling me. For over thirty years I had attended to many, many families as loved ones took their last breath. It was now time for me to do the same in my own family.

A week after our visit to see my mother she began to show signs that the pneumonia had return and the doctor wanted to admit her to the hospital again, but my mother refuse. He asked her point blank, “Are you ready for hospice?” and without hesitation she said, “Yes.” In July of 2007, I left St. John’s in Northampton, and Caren and I moved to St. Augustine … and that summer and fall we spent a lot of time driving between here and Asheville.

Those last few months of my mother’s life were extremely rich. Friends from around the world came to visit her, and almost every night there was a dinner party at my mother’s house with a friend or family member preparing a sumptuous meal.

The doctors had prescribed morphine to ease the tightness in her chest, and as she relaxed her health actually improved … at least her quality of life. At one point she said to the doctor, “The only thing I miss is having a glass of Scotch before dinner.” The doctor looked at her and replied, “Millie, if you want your Scotch go ahead and have it. What’s the worst thing that could happen … that it would kill you?” To this day, when the family gathers for a meal there is an empty place setting with a glass of Scotch sitting beside it.

My mother was an accomplished artist and on a Saturday morning in late October she was doing what she loved … working on what would be her last painting. That afternoon she didn’t feel well, and by Sunday she was running a fever. Very early on Monday morning we got the phone call that she was failing and we immediately began our journey on those well-worn roads to Asheville. My mother died before we got to Brunswick, Georgia.

My sister Susan said that just before she died she was kissing the air, so my sister asked who she was kissing. My mother said, “Oh, it is your father. He is kissing me.” Those were her last words. She died on the eighth anniversary of my father’s death.

We held her funeral at the St. Francis outdoor chapel at Kanuga … an Episcopal Conference Center near Hendersonville, North Carolina. It was a beautiful fall day and we buried her ashes, along with those of my father, and some dirt from the grave of my brother who had died as an infant, in the memorial garden there. It was when we came back to St. Augustine that I found St. Cyprian’s.

Between the time I had left St. John’s in Northampton in early July and my mother’s death in late October I had not darkened the doorway of a church. After her funeral it seemed to be the right time to find a community of faith. I tried Trinity Parish for an early service one morning and left after just fifteen minutes … I knew it was not a good fit. I knew about St. Cyprian’s because Caren and I had walked past this place many times when we had visited our daughter who at the time lived right down the street… so I gave St. Cyprian’s a chance. I knew when I walked through the door that I was home.

Just a little bit of faith can go a long way. If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can make it through tough times. But I think I have learned at least one thing from my experience. My classmate, Nancy, who had a necklace with a mustard seed encased in a small glass globe was really wearing a symbol of her faith … but it was not her faith. Nancy’s faith had grown through her tough times in the compassionate community of her church. Encased in a glass globe the mustard seed will never be able to grow. The mustard seed … and our faith … must be planted to make a difference. Our faith must find expression … and a supportive community. But once the seed is planted, watch out, you just don’t know how big it will grow, or how much it will spread.

I found this church of St. Cyprian’s the same way many of you found this church … we were going through some tough times in our lives. Some of us, when we walked through that door for the first time may not have had much faith, but it was enough … and once it was planted it grew beyond our imaginations. That is God’s spirit at work.

Like the exiled Jewish people in the Book of Lamentations we may, at times, wonder where our God is. And like the disciples who followed Jesus as he challenged the powers of the world with a faith they couldn’t quite grasp we may ask for more faith thinking it is something to be given to us. But it only takes a little faith … just a little … and with some seeking, some expression, and a supportive community of people who share some of the same experiences of living through some tough times … that little bit of faith will be enough to grow beyond out imagination.

We don’t need much. If our faith is only the size of a mustard seed it will be enough.

Amen.