

Last Monday night, I watched what passed for a presidential debate and the aftermath that followed. The longer I watched the self-centeredness, character assassination and disrespect, the more disappointed I grew. I was in a right funk until Tuesday morning when I saw these lectionary readings.

First, there was dear, cranky old Habakkuk: “Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.” I couldn’t have expressed my dismay any better. But then the psalmist redirected all those complaints: “Commit your life to the Lord, put your trust in God, and God will act... Be still before the Lord and wait in patience.”

And then came the letter to Timothy to refocus frustration into trusting action: “Rekindle the grace of God that is within you.” In the Greek, the letter actually advises Timothy to “fan into flame” the grace that God has granted, with the implication that it may otherwise dwindle to an ashy ember.

Habakkuk was upset about the political and religious circumstances surrounding the Israelites in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E. God’s response to him then is the same to us now: Live by your faith. The word we translate as “faith” is *‘emunah* in Hebrew and it refers to the posture of a person who trusts and hopes, but who relinquishes the future outcome to God.

And that may be why Jesus responds to the disciples in the way that he does. “Increase our faith,” they plead. Increase our faith. This seems like a reasonable request, but Jesus does not respond like we might expect. You see, the disciples have not really understood that to talk about a *quantity* of faith, as though it could be measured, doesn’t really make sense. You might as well ask for a pound of loyalty, three feet of courage or a gallon of trust.

We can be equally off the mark when we misunderstand faith as the magical ability to manipulate supernatural powers that move mountains or trees. But faith is not a method for controlling God or even God’s creation.

“Increase our faith,” the disciples implore. But Jesus gives them an answer that points out just how absurd their request is. “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."

Now, there are two details you need to know about this response. First, the grammar of the Greek suggests that Jesus is saying: "If you had the faith of a mustard seed (*and you do*)..." That is to say that Luke's Jesus is implying not only that the apostles don't *need* more faith, but that they *have* all the faith that is necessary and maybe even all the faith that is possible.

The second detail involves Jesus' reference to the black mulberry tree. It was a common plant that all the apostles would have recognized. These trees have a highly aggressive and extensive root system that grow deep and very wide, so uprooting one would be exceptionally difficult. And the idea of going to all that trouble only to transplant a mulberry tree in the sea where it would stop bearing fruit and die doesn't make any rational sense.

But if we hesitate and ponder with the apostles in this brief moment of unknowing, three truths emerge: First, we can't measure God's life and love. Second, we can't manipulate God's grace, either as a power we can control or as a means for justifying or rewarding ourselves. And third, working through genuine faith, God can render the impossible possible.

We are "worthless slaves," which does not mean, by the way, that we have no value. The Greek word translated as "worthless" or "useless" is *achreios*. Quite literally, the word means "without need," but there is no word in English that corresponds perfectly. As the Christian children of God, we are servants to whom nothing is owed. We serve in the banquet of God's kingdom simply because of who we are, or more importantly, because of the One to whom faith belongs.

You see, faith is not human certainty about a series of religious propositions. Faith is a gift from God and it is the *nature*, not the *amount* of that faith that enables God to work. God's *infinite* faith works through our actions in ways that baffle and expand ordinary human experience. The creative nature of God's gift of faith transfigures our whole way of perceiving and responding to life. Faith is our willing cooperation with God, even in the tiniest actions, actions as tiny as a mustard seed.

When we live and act in faith it is enough for God to do God's work. Our work is to live and act in faith. Think for just a minute about all the good that you, sitting here in these pews, did over the past week at work, at school, with friends or just out in the world being who you are. Look around this sanctuary and imagine the mountain of good created by small acts of kindness, small gestures of reconciliation and moments of respect.

What if none of those things had been tended to? What word of hope, what small act of forgiveness, what little moment of peace or shared joy would have been left out of someone's life? Take all those away and the world takes one more step toward actually becoming the grim train-wreck that too many people believe is the only reality possible.

Our living and acting faithfully is enough for God to spread a different reality. Our is to live and act faithfully, to live in *'emunah*, the root word for faith that also gives us the word "amen." When we trust in God and hope, even as we relinquish the future outcome to God, we make just a little more room for the blossoming of the kingdom of heaven right here. God uses even the most ordinary of our daily acts to care for God's world in extraordinary ways.

Let me tell you a story. This one comes from Rachel Naomi Remen who wrote about relationship with her grandfather, a Jewish scholar of the Kabbalah, Judaism's mystical writings, who had a profound effect on her spiritual life. "Often, when he came to visit," she writes, "my grandfather would bring me a present. These were never the sorts of things that other people brought, dolls and books and stuffed animals. My dolls and stuffed animals have been gone for more than half a century, but many of my grandfather's gifts are still with me.

Once he brought me a little paper cup. I looked inside it expecting something special. It was full of dirt. I was not allowed to play with dirt. Disappointed, I told him this. He smiled at me fondly. Turning, he picked up the little teapot from my dolls' tea set and took me to the kitchen where he filled it with water. Back in the nursery, he put the little cup on the window sill and handed me the teapot. "If you promise to put some water in the cup every day, something may happen," he told me.

At the time, I was four years old and my nursery was on the sixth floor of an apartment building in Manhattan. This whole thing made no sense to me at all. I looked at him dubiously. He nodded with encouragement. “Every day, Neshume-le,” he told me. [“Neshume-le” was his pet name for her.]

And so I promised. At first, curious to see what would happen, I did not mind doing this. But as the days went by and nothing changed, it got harder and harder to remember to water the cup. After a week, I asked my grandfather if it was time to stop yet. Shaking his head no, he said “Every day, Neshume-le.” The second week was even harder and I became resentful of my promise to water the cup. When my grandfather came again, I tried to give it back to him but he refused to take it, saying simply, “Every day, Neshume-le.” By the third week, I began to forget to water the cup. Often I would remember only after I had been put to bed and would have to get out of bed and water it in the dark. But I did not miss a single day. And one morning, there were two little green leaves that had not been there the night before.

I was completely astonished. Day by day they got bigger. I could not wait to tell my grandfather, certain that he would be as surprised as I was. But of course he was not. Carefully he explained to me that life is everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places. I was delighted. “And all it needs is water, Grandpa?” I asked him. Gently he touched me on the top of my head. “No, Neshume-le,” he said. “All it needs is your faithfulness.”

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