

Did that Gospel, with the image of a slave, make you uncomfortable? When I read this Gospel the first time, I sure squirmed in my chair. We've probably all heard the mustard seed story for about as long as we can remember, but the portion about the master and the slave..... Don't we all know that it, and passages like it, were once used to justify slavery in the American South, even to imply that somehow, being enslaved was a sign of "otherness," less than equal. Because the use of a slave metaphor made *me* uncomfortable, I dug deeper into the passage to see what it is really about.

Taken alone, one might wonder why the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. In the verses just before these, Jesus set down some pretty tough requirements to be a disciple:

- 1) If you cause a little one to stumble, it would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around your neck.
- 2) You have to forgive anyone who asks it, even if they repeat the offense as much as seven times in one day.

Those are difficult asks. No wonder the disciples wanted Jesus to increase their faith!

Let's be sure we understand the metaphors Jesus uses in his response. Do you all know what a mustard seed looks like? You may have seen smaller seeds, but in Jesus' time, it was the smallest known seed in the holy land. And that mulberry tree, it was huge and more deeply rooted than most other trees; difficult to move, probably even with modern machinery.

Even though I know what a mustard seed looks like, I'm not sure what a mustard-seed-size *faith* is. Does anyone have an idea?

Maybe it is like this: I've shared before that my calling to the diaconate was surprising, even startling. I wrestled with the idea in middle-of-the-night wakefulness, in prayer, and with a discernment group of fellow parishioners, but I still wasn't sure I was hearing a call. Eventually, I decided that if I set my foot on the path to becoming a deacon and it wasn't what God wanted me to do, God had the power to let me know. I visualized a traffic light. And the light in my head stayed green as I proceeded through meetings with the

bishop and Commission on Ministry; physical and mental health exams; months and months of coursework; then more meetings with the Bishop, Commission on Ministry, and the Standing Committee. Finally, a personalized test that challenged me to apply what I'd learned and it took me five days to complete. The traffic light remained green; the red light never came.

I shared this with Pat a few months ago and he sort of rolled his eyes as if to say, "Really? That wasn't much to proceed on." In one way I agree with him, but in hindsight I also think that my decision to keep going until the light turned red was a mustard-seed-faith moment. I thought a calling would involve a light-bulb over my head or some driving passion to be ordained, that it required *increased* faith. I now realize I already had the faith inside me to do what God planned for me. Just like the disciples who thought they needed their faith increased to do the hard things Jesus had laid out for them.

Then, Jesus elaborates using that difficult metaphor of slave and master. Not only did it make me uncomfortable, it was difficult to unravel. As I explored it, I realized that Jesus wasn't speaking about the sort of slavery we had in American history, with the racist base that we still struggle to overcome in this country. While the New Revised Standard Version Bible that I read from a few minutes ago uses the word "slave," I discovered several other translations tell this story using the words master and servant.

It may seem extreme to expect a servant to work all day in the field, then cook a meal, and serve it. But such effort was the expectation of a slave or servant in Biblical times. I think Jesus was expounding on the small amount of faith it takes to do the hard work of a disciple. He is saying, "Does a servant have to be told over and over what his duties are?" The servant does them without questioning or being thanked. The servant believes (has faith) it is his duty.

Even today, there are lots of families in the world, actually right here in our city, our neighborhood for whom similar effort is necessary: they are the undereducated, single parents, immigrants, probably even some of the folks who regularly stop at the North Des Moines Fridge. They have hard, physical

“day jobs” like housecleaning, factory work, healthcare assistance, and outdoor utility maintenance. When they get home, there are children to feed and household chores to do. No one outside their own families thanks them. They might appreciate it, but they don’t expect it. Those workers have faith they are doing what is necessary to maintain their families, in words like the Gospel, “only what they ought to have done.”

Here’s another way to look at it. Have you ever thanked someone for doing something you thought was special or required extra effort, only to have them shrug it off and say, “I was just doing my job,” or “It was the right thing to do.” (By the way, I’m not telling you to stop thanking or praising others for doing something special or extra; we all like to be appreciated.) When that person shrugs off your thanks, they are subtly telling you, “I’m not really worthy of praise, I was doing what I knew I should.” Isn’t that another way of saying, “I am a worthless or unworthy slave; I have only done what I ought to have done?”

I think our new garden exemplifies this Gospel. Over the last few years, I’ve heard numerous conversations about what we should do with that land east of the parking: a playground, a memorial garden, a gazebo, even a warming shelter. Most members of the congregation felt we ought to do more with it than simply mow it and have an annual picnic. Then last winter, a few of us came together to consider whether a community garden was possible. It was just a kernel of an idea, maybe the size of a mustard seed. But we believed it was possible, and so did some garden experts at Lutheran Services of Iowa. So together, we did all the hard things that needed to be done to make it happen, in fact we still are. We anticipate that this time next year, we will have permanent fencing. Today there’s no tree planted in it on the land east of the parking lot, but many *other* plants are growing and producing food for refugee families there. If we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can continue to do “what we ought to have done” and it will bring us joy and gladness.