

A Minimalist Faith

Lamentations 1:1-6; II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10; Psalm 37 1-9; 10-07-07

Years ago, as a child, I received a mustard seed necklace for my birthday. This necklace consisted of a little mustard seed encased in plastic. Of course, when I received this necklace I was reminded by the giver that it was a “Christian symbol” recalling Jesus’ words about faith. I was told that if we had faith the size of a tiny mustard seed we could work miracles. I am not sure what sense this made to me at that time, I was probably 8 or so, but it was all the rage to have one of those mustard seed necklaces, so I was very happy. This was at a stage in my life when I wanted to be like everyone else. I am not certain where it is now but it must be around somewhere. I look at that little symbol quite differently now. That is a good thing, as we experience life and its lessons, we need to be open to change or we are dead beings.

As I read the scripture from Luke and encountered the mustard seed in a series of somewhat disjointed statements, I started thinking about it again. In the Gospel of Matthew we are told that if the mustard seed is planted it will grow into a huge bush, strong enough to support birds in its branches. We think of mustard as a small herb- like plant while in the Middle East it grows into something quite large, probably due to the climate.

As I thought about the parables of Jesus and the mustard seed, I wondered about that little seed encased in plastic and not encouraged to grow. Was our faith meant to be sealed into a set space to be observed and commented upon but never cultivated? I think not.

Now, I know Jesus was telling his disciples that their faith was faulty. Who could blame them? They had begun to follow a new way not knowing at all where it might lead them. I suspect they did not know that in a brief period of time their leader would be crucified.. They were not sure about this fellow who asked them to leave hearth and home and those they held dear to follow him somewhere or other. They had taken a risk and now they were told their faith was not big enough or strong enough to do the work that lay before them. Of course it was not, they were just beginning their journey.

Their problem is our problem. That is how these stories of the Bible speak to us, through the eternal truth they carry that ties us together through the generations. Our faith always starts out small as we begin our journey through life. There is nothing wrong in that. But, we need to realize that it is our responsibility to help it grow. It is not my responsibility to grow your faith, it is not your parents’ responsibility to grow your faith, it is not your friends’ responsibility to grow your faith. The buck stops with each of us. Josiah Royce noted, “ Religious faith, indeed, relates to that which is above us, but it must arise from that within us.” Others may point the way for us to follow, may show us the doors that need opening, but the work of the journey falls on our shoulders. John Jay Chapman wrote: All our language is personal, we cannot hand our faith to one another. This has always been true.”

Very often we feed our faith, or think we do, by talking about it—there is lots of hot air blown around. But our faith does not grow by air alone. It needs to be grounded in the stories of our faith—rooted deeply in what we have in our Bible. Much of our Bible

may not make sense to us in our day and age, but much of it does. It is called “the living word” for a reason. It is meant to challenge us and pull us into thoughtful and discerning dialogue. That is where the richness comes from—that is what nurtures us and what encourages our faith to grow—the dialogue we take up in our day and age with the ancient stories.

Many of you know I do not believe in having theology put in a box and set aside and marked, “Do not disturb.” I believe we take part in a positive process of growth toward a better understanding of God as revealed through Christ when we ask questions, reflect on the answers we discover, digest what is good and what helps us find our way. This does not mean that we simply throw away things that do not seem to apply to our lives at present, but that we save them to savor again while seeking new nuances of meaning in our scriptures. There is always new light to be shed on God’s Word; new directions to be drawn from it and new implications for our lives.

So, that mustard seed faith—is it bound up in a cell of plastic to be looked at and admired? Is it to always be left alone to remain the same? Or is it to be set free to grow into all it can become? The choice is always ours, you know. Do we want to practice a minimalist faith doing the least we need to do and nothing more? Or, do we want to make something of it? -- Amen