

“A Little Dab’ll Do Ya”
Matthew 17:14-20
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 21, 2007

“The simple truth is that if you had a mere kernel of faith, a [mustard] seed, say, you would tell this mountain, ‘Move!’ and it would move. There is nothing you wouldn’t be able to tackle.” (Matthew 17:20, The Message)

Jesus was a master of metaphor. In order to communicate eternal truths, he often used common, everyday objects. When he wanted to communicate how much God cared for those who had gathered for his Sermon on the Mount, for instance, he used the image of the lilies of the field. They “neither toil nor spin,” he said, “yet even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these.” You can bet that from that point onward, whenever those people came across a lily, they connected it with God’s care for them. When he wanted to talk about the peoples’ need to “be prepared” in their spiritual life, he used the image of the groom’s sudden arrival at the marriage feast. People back then would have known exactly what he was talking about with that image and remembered it every time they went to a wedding. It was the same when he used the common image of salt to emphasize the important role that people of faith play in the purification, seasoning, and preservation of the world. And when it came to talking about faith, he used the example of a mustard seed—something with which everyone of that day would have been familiar. The smallest of all seeds, it not only has a big flavor, but it also can grow into a tree in which the birds of the air can build their home. He also said that if the disciples’ faith was merely the size of a mustard seed, they could say to a mountain “Move from here to there” and it would be so.

I want us to focus on that mustard seed metaphor today. It is so important for our Christian lives. But I also want to update it a bit. If Jesus were standing behind this pulpit today, he probably wouldn’t use that particular metaphor, mainly because most of us have never seen a mustard seed. Unless you’re into baking ham or canning pickles, mustard seeds are not something that you run across in your everyday life. Metaphors have to be relevant to work. So that got me to thinking: what metaphor would Jesus use today. If he wanted to communicate the same idea this morning—that mountains can be

moved with just a little bit of faith—how would he do it? Perhaps he would use the metaphor of a silicon chip. With those tiny devices inside our computer, there is hardly any piece of information that we can't "move." They are just amazing. Perhaps Jesus would say, "If you had faith the size of an Intel Core processor you could say to this mountain 'Move from here to there' and it would." Or then again, maybe not. Doesn't have the same ring to it, does it? Or maybe he could use the image of an insect. Did you see how those tiny bugs caused Joba Chamberlain's pitches to "move" the other night when the Yankees were playing the Indians? Our beloved former Husker was not the same after they attacked him and started crawling everywhere. Now there's a possibility. "If you had faith the size of a sweat bug that flies in your ears and up your nose..." On second thought, that is not a great image, is it?

But even if either of those images were any good, even if Jesus did use them, I fear that they would give us the wrong impression. Those particular metaphors seem to emphasize the negative, you see, sort of like "if only you would have that little amount, then you could do it, but since you don't you can't." Useable faith, they say, is lacking. But I don't think that is what Jesus was saying. Right before he first offered his mustard seed metaphor, you see, Jesus told his disciples they had "little faith." It is important to remember how and why Jesus used that term. Let's go back to the story. It all began when a desperate father came up to Jesus asking for help. This man had a son who was said to be "moonstruck," the term people used back then for what we call epilepsy today. Depending upon which translation you read, this poor boy suffered terribly, having violent seizures that often caused him great harm, such as causing him to fall into pits of fire or pools of water. The father needed help badly and had originally sought out the disciples, but they were unable to do anything for him. This frustrated Jesus, as he along with Peter, James, and John had just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration. Up on that summit those three disciples saw their teacher as they never had before. They also heard a voice telling them that said this was God's beloved son. But even after that awesome mountaintop experience, they didn't really "get it." They completely misunderstood what they saw and heard and the impact it should have had on their lives. And it was at that point that Jesus' frustration finally came shining through. I like how

the translation known as The Message rendered his words: *“What a generation! No sense of God! No focus to your lives! How many times do I need to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this?”* Then Jesus looked at the disciples and said, *“Bring me the boy.”* Instantly he was cured.

Now after everyone had gone away and Jesus had calmed down, the disciples sheepishly came to Jesus and asked him why they were unable heal the boy. As I mentioned before, they had tried, but apparently had no luck. It was at that time that Jesus replied with words that have become very famous, very familiar, and—I believe—very misunderstood. He said, *“Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”*

Jesus told the disciples that they had “little faith.” Please note that he did not say that they had “no faith.” He did not say that they were “without faith.” He said that they had “little faith.” As a matter of fact, when you read the gospel of Matthew you will discover that “little faith” is Jesus’ favorite term for his disciples. And it is both interesting and important to know the context that he always used it. Right after Jesus healed the leper, the centurion’s servant, and Peter’s mother-in-law, for example, they were crossing the Sea of Galilee by boat when a great storm arose. The disciples feared for their lives and cried out, “Lord, save us.” Jesus replied by saying, “Why do you doubt, you of little faith?” Then he stilled the storm. Now move forward a few chapters. Immediately after the feeding of the 5,000, the disciples were rowing across that same sea when another storm arose. As they were being tossed to and fro they saw Jesus coming toward them, walking on the top of the waves. They were terrified. Peter cried out, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” So Jesus said, “Fine, come on.” Matthew tells us that Peter did just that and was actually walking on the water—until, of course, he took his eyes off Jesus, realized where he was, and started sinking like a rock. After Jesus fished him out of the water and got him back into the boat, he said to all of them, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” We’re going to learn more about those two stories in the coming weeks, but what I want you to remember for now is that both of

those experiences happened immediately after Jesus had done something miraculous. The disciples had just witnessed what Jesus could do and then decided to continue to follow him. Even if they didn't completely understand what they had witnessed, they still had faith. But when push came to shove, when things got tough, the disciples let their fears take over. And when they did, Jesus responded to them by saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

It was always in situations when the disciples gave into their fears that Jesus accused the disciples of being people of "little faith." But once again it is important to remember that Jesus didn't accuse them of having "no faith." They believed; they just let their fears get in the way. Yet even with their "little faith," even if it was no bigger than a mustard seed, Jesus said that they still had more than enough to move whatever mountain stood in their way. And all of that leads me back to that search for another metaphor. How do we translate that old metaphor into a new one that we could understand today? I'll have to admit that I'm still looking. This one's hard. The best I could find was one that a lot of you probably don't know. I am also in danger of dating myself with its use, but I guess it's worth a try. How many of you remember Brylcreme? For those of you who don't, Brlycreme was a major men's hair care product before we all realized that the wet head was dead. Unlike Vitalis, which poured out of a bottle, Brylcreme came in a tube. You would squeeze some into the palm of your hand, rub your hands together, and then work your hands over and around your scalp. Your hair was then ready to comb. And once you were done not a hair on your head would be out of place—until, of course, some pretty girl came along and messed it up. The use of this product, you see, was promised to result in a quite satisfying experience for young men. According to the song, not only would "all the girls pursue ya," but they would also "love to run their fingers through your hair." (As I was only 4 or 5 at the time, I cannot attest to the truth of that promise. As a matter of fact, quite the opposite happened to me. When my across-the-street neighbor and classmate Linda saw my hair all slicked down, she just busted me in the nose and called me a "sissy.") Personal experience aside, the really good thing about Brylcreme was that you did not need a lot for it to achieve the desired effect. You did not

need to squeeze a whole bunch out of the tube and into your hand. Rather, you only needed a tiny bit, just a smidgen, or as the old jingle used to say, “A little dab’ll do ya.”

“A little dab’ll do ya.” That is what Jesus said about the role that faith played in the life of his disciples. That is also what Jesus says about the role faith should play in ours. We don’t need a lot of it. We don’t need to squeeze a whole big glob out of the tube. That is because “A little dab’ll do ya.” We simply need to make use of the tiny bit we already have. And you do have it, you know. You wouldn’t be here this morning if you didn’t. Perhaps you could think of it in the same way that you think of the phrase “a leap *of* faith.” It isn’t “a leap *into* faith.” The leap you take happens because you are already in faith and want to put that faith into action. You don’t take that leap and then get faith. You already have it when you do. You don’t have it all figured out, yet that doesn’t stop you from making that leap. It’s similar to when my two boys were much younger than they are today and I urged them to jump off that lakeside dock into my arms. They wouldn’t have done it if they didn’t already have some sense that I would pull them out when they went plunging into the water. Even though they were probably only about 6 and 4 years old at the time and didn’t really understand all the ramifications of what they were doing, they knew me well enough to trust that I would be there for them after they jumped. A little dab was all they needed. Chuck Warnock, a pastor in Virginia, spoke in a similar way about faith. He said, *“It’s not about trying harder to be ‘good Christians.’ It’s not about putting on some phony mantle of pseudo-spirituality. It’s not about adopting an aura of other-worldliness. It’s Jesus we need...all it takes is a little confidence in Jesus on our part, [and] God fills in the blanks. [Its] like the little boy who gave Jesus his lunch. Not much, only a few small pieces of flat bread and tiny fish, just a boy’s lunch. Too small to feed more than one boy, much less a crowd of 5,000. But in the hands of Jesus a little becomes a lot. A little faith moves mountains. A little faith uproots trees. A little faith—the faith you [already] have—is all you need. A little faith in a big God. It’s not about us, [you see] it’s about God.”*¹

¹ <http://chuckwarnock.wordpress.com>

“A little dab’ll do ya.” What could we do at Elkhorn Hills if we just used the little dab we already have? What would happen if we put our little faith in our big God? Well, I think we got part of our answer last week. After telling you about the situation in North Omaha and how one of our United Methodist churches is trying to make a difference, I asked for your help. I hoped to send to the Revs. Charlotte Abram and Ralph Gaines at least \$2000 so that they could bolster their after-school program for the kids in their community. Now you did not know how the program was going to work. You were not well versed in all of the social and economic factors that cause gangs to be such a problem in that part of the city. The vast majority of you had never met either Charlotte or Ralph. But whether it was in the church or in God or maybe even in me, you used what little faith you already have, and the other day I was able to send a check for \$5100 to the new Tri-Community UMC. Think of the lives that are going to be touched in North Omaha simply because you made use of the faith that is already in your possession. Just “A little dab’ll do ya,” you see. That is really all you need. Listen to Jesus again:

“The simple truth is that if you had a mere kernel of faith, a [mustard] seed, say, you would tell this mountain ‘Move!’ and it would move. There is nothing you wouldn’t be able to tackle.”

Pay attention now. Jesus is not interested in the physical rearrangement of the mountains. He is interested in the spiritual rearrangement of the fears that stand before us like mountains. He is interested in the elimination of those mountainous perceptions that keep us from living the life we are invited to lead—as either individual Christians or as his Church. We don’t have to have it all figured out before we do that. We don’t have to abolish all our doubts. We don’t have to have all of our proverbial ducks in a row before we attempt to move whatever stands before us. Right now everything we need to move those mountains is already inside us. All we need to do is put it to use. For even with faith the size of a mustard seed or a poppy seed or maybe even a sesame seed, there is nothing we can’t do. On this first Sunday of our annual Stewardship Campaign, it is so important for us to remember that just “A little dab’ll do ya.”

