***A GOD OF SMALL THINGS***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on October 5, 2025*

*based on Luke 17:5-10*

This is one of those stories in which Jesus shows up pretty cranky.  And this time it’s not because of his anger with the self-righteous religious types like the Pharisees, or with the rich or the powerful. No, it’s his hand-picked friends, the disciples, that annoy him.

**The story begins with the disciples approaching Jesus with a seemingly reasonable request:**“Lord! Increase our faith!”**I**t’s an understandable request given the sort of things Jesus has been teaching:

Love your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Bless those who curse you. Forgiving people when they don’t deserve it. Give without expecting anything in return. Be willing to be crucified if necessary.

Jesus responds to the disciple’s request with a touch of irritation— the Greek suggests he’s getting a bit snarky. He tells them that if they had faith, small as a mustard seed, they could command a black mulberry tree to uproot itself and replant itself in the sea and it would obey.

He then proceeds to ask them whether a servant would be so cavalier as to demand a meal with his master, or special praise for doing his required household duties.

**Now, this may strike us as a little odd because we know Jesus wasn’t in the habit of speaking unkindly about slaves or people of low status.**Just before this story in Luke we get the familiar story of the rich man and Lazarus where a beggar is assigned higher honor than his rich neighbor.

Yes, and we know also that Jesus often described heaven as a banquet in which all are invited—slave and free, rich and poor alike—and he often talked about how the least among us would take the place of honor at that table to eat next to the almighty host.

From the beginning, Jesus’ ministry was about lifting up the humble and humbling the proud.

He loved challenging those in authority and giving voice to the marginalized, so it’s safe to assume that there must have been an element of pride or entitlement at work in the disciple’s request to warrant this sort of response.

Entitlement. It’s a very dangerous mindset. Criss Jami has said, “When we think that we are automatically entitled to something, that is when we start walking all over others to get it.” Brené Brown puts it this way: “What separates privilege from entitlement is gratitude.” We realize that we have it good *not* because we deserve something but because we know we are lucky; we know we are blessed.

A couple of years ago I watched a series of interviews that the wonderful journalist, Edward R. Murrow, did way back in the 1950s. In one he was interviewing the actor, Tony Curtis. What impressed me most about Tony Curtis was that as Hollywood actors go he seemed to be unusually self-effacing. In the interview he was clearly *unimpressed* with his own celebrity. And it didn’t sound like a pose because he referred to himself several times as “Bernie Schwartz” from the Bronx, which was his real name. There, in front of millions of television viewers, he never pretended to be anything else.

I read an interview with Barry Paris, the ghost-writer of one of the two Tony Curtis’s autobiographies. He spoke of meeting the actor for the first time. He was a bit terrified – kind of star struck, and began their association by saying, “Mr. Curtis, when I was eleven years old, I went to see the movie, *The Vikings* three times in two days.” He said, “you know, more than anything in the world I wanted to be Tony Curtis.” And Tony Curtis answered with the words, “So did I.”

How refreshing. Tony Curtis had a grounded sense of himself, and he didn’t need it inflated by anything. I know a man in his nineties now, who had been a friend of his when they were both just kids and Tony Curtis never forsook him or his other childhood friends. He did this, of course, because he never forgot or forsook the young person he had always been.

Once a Buddhist student asked his teacher the question, “Do I have Buddha nature?”

His teacher said, “No,” you don’t.

“But,” said the student. “I understand that everything has Buddha nature. The trees, the birds, a dog, even the rocks.”

“Yes,” said his master, “that is true, everything has Buddha nature, but not you.”

“Why?” asked the student, incredulously.

“Because you ask this question,” said his teacher.

We all want to better ourselves. Ambition is built into our culture. By contrast, this morning’s text seems to encourage a modesty that most Americans would find uncomfortable, unappealing. It says, “Be happy to just be who you are, whatever that amounts to.

And Jesus adds one more thing -- do your duty.”

Why did Jesus say this? Maybe because he believed that looking at life from the point of view of the dutiful servant is the only way to have any real joy in life. If you think you deserve things you’ll end up disappointed.

Yes, and if you don’t expect anything you will be surprised by grace all over the place because life is a fruit-salad of different experiences. When you’re on the bottom, good things can still happen to surprise you.

In the very next story in the gospel there will be ten lepers who will be healed and nine of them will have a sense of entitlement and not one of them will return to give thanks to Jesus. Only a lowly Samaritan will do that.

He’ll be so pleased he’ll fall down on the ground, beside himself with happiness and delight. But it’s only because he understands the truth at the bottom of the story from this week that he will leap for joy.

**And I wonder if we don’t get a little clue as to why Jesus says this about duty in the strange—downright bizarre—image of a mulberry tree getting planted in the ocean.**

Imagine it: a black mulberry tree suddenly uprooting itself, flying through the air, and then replanting itself in the sea.  What on earth is that about? What an odd expression of faith!

I wonder if Jesus was playfully poking fun at the disciples’ ongoing preoccupation with flashy signs and wonders as a measure of faith.

They’d been asking for an upgrade in supernatural powers, at one point suggesting it sure would be nice to be able to call down fire from heaven every time someone who hosted them on their missionary journeys ended up rejecting them.

**But the signs and wonders performed by Jesus and described in the gospels were never for show. They always had a point. They were always constructive.**They…

*Healed  Liberated Multiplied Fed Blessed  Restored Comforted Gave people purpose when they had none at all.*

They pointed to the mission of Jesus and the purpose of the reign of God he inaugurated. And today these stories remind us of our own call to do every one of those things ourselves.

Of this odd story about the black mulberry tree the late Rachel Held Evans has this to say …

***There’s nothing more ridiculously useless than replanting a mulberry tree in the ocean!****And I wonder if Jesus wasn’t reminding his disciples that faith isn’t manifested in flashy magic tricks, or pointless, self-congratulatory displays of power … but in daily acts of faithfulness—those quotidian acts of obedience that grow the kingdom, one carefully tended little mustard seed at a time.*

*It’s helpful here to contrast this bizarre idea of uprooting a mulberry tree with the work of the servant who tends sheep, works the land, plants seeds, makes dinner****.  I wonder if Jesus isn’t telling the disciples that if they have enough faith to be faithful, then that is enough.***

*Faith, after all, is a gift.  And we don’t have any business telling God we don’t have enough, when God always gives us enough to be faithful.****God always gives us enough to do something useful, to “make it work.”***

Maybe the mistake the disciples make isn’t so much in asking for more faith, but in thinking they don’t have enough, in thinking God’s gift to them was insufficient.

How easy it is to think we don’t have enough! These guys were in the very presence of Jesus and still they wanted more!

Walter Brueggemann has said: “We all have a hunger for certitude. The problem is the Gospel is not about certitude, it’s about fidelity.”

We’re not so unlike the disciples are we?  How often we tell ourselves: “If I only had more faith, I could … do something important; do something impressive; I wouldn’t be so scared.

A friend emailed me this last week to say he was struggling to find a way to address the president’s announcement that he intended to use our military against the American people. Forget our historic enemies abroad. He wants to use the military against Portland because we are so welcoming when it comes to immigrants and gay people.

My friend was trying to figure out some big thing he could do without getting his family members arrested, and then it occurred to me that the most effective act of resistance I’ve seen lately was the fellow dressed in a full chicken suit standing in front of the ICE Headquarters on Macadam Avenue holding a sign that said, “Portland will outlive him.”

The humor in it was so … Portland. And the message was also a very Christian kind of response to authoritarian abuses of power, if you think about it. If we stay true to ourselves and our caring for others, we will outlast him.

Duty -- it’s an ugly little word. You hardly ever hear it anymore. It’s close to *doulos*, the Greek word for slave. Motivational speakers will tell you that attempting to appeal to people on the basis of duty today would be counterproductive. Right? Today we tell people to follow their bliss, not do their duty. “See what your feelings lead you to do,” people say.

Today, it’s all about feelings.

I remember hearing Fred Craddock, my favorite preacher, speak about doing a preaching workshop in which he randomly handed out scripture passages to participants for them to prepare a short sermon on overnight. One person came up to him complaining that she’d read the one he’d just given her. She’d read it and she had no feeling about it so she wanted another.

“No,” he said, “that’s your text. Take that one home and read it a few times until you get to feeling something about it.” Kind of a snarky response – like Jesus’s to his disciples, right?.

But look, so many of the truly worthy things you do in life spring *not* from feeling but from nothing more passionate than a warmed over sense of duty, and really, when you really think about it, that’s perfectly okay. Allow me to give you an example.

When I was fifteen, my mother went into a deep depression. It was a second deep submersion in the darkness for her. She’d had one seven years before. This one came with delusions and hearing voices and weeping that would last all afternoon long. I didn’t know how to deal with it so I just pretended everything was fine most of the time and ignored it, hoping it would just pass.

Now, many times in the morning at breakfast it would be like a storm had passed. I remember one particular morning when she was particularly lucid. Being lucid on this particular morning left her feeling guilty and she spoke up, tentatively, I remember, saying how sorry she felt about how hard this must be on my dad and myself.

I remember how far I’d pulled away emotionally from her out of self-protection. But I also remember that, out of a sense of duty, and duty alone, I said, “It’s okay, mom. I know it must be so much harder for you. Just know that I love you and that nothing can ever change that.”

I remember now how the tension of the moment broke and a wave of love came over me after that. It was duty that had forced me to find the words, but having found them the feelings followed right along afterward.

And , again, it didn’t start with love. That had dried up. That was in hiding. It started instead with a tiny kernel of duty … which brings us back around to where we started, with Jesus’ mustard seed.

Elizabeth Rooney put it this way in a poem which is a kind of prayer. I’ll close with it.

***Oblation***  
  
I hope each day  
To offer less to You, [God]  
Each day  
By Your great love to be  
Diminished   
Until at last I am  
So decreased by Your hand  
And You, so grown in me,  
That my whole offering  
Is just an emptiness  
For You to fill  
Or not  
According to Your will.

Amen