



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Increase Our Faith!

Sermon for the Sunday after Pentecost, October 2, 2016

Readings: Lamentations 1:1-6; Psalm 137; 2 Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10

Sermon text: The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "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." Luke 17:5

I have been thinking about plants. Maybe because in our gospel lesson Jesus talks about mustard seeds and mulberry trees in response to his disciples asking how they might increase their faith.

But another reason I have been thinking about plants is because on Friday I attended the fourth annual Food Systems Symposium at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. Betsy Fisher, Abby Nathanson and I presented a workshop on creating rituals around food. The symposium keynote speaker was Wes Jackson, founder and president emeritus of the [Land Institute](#) in Kansas. Here is a passage from the Land Institute mission statement:

"It took 10,000 years for humans to become reliant upon an industrial agriculture built upon annual crop monocultures. In the past forty years, The Land Institute and our partners have been breeding new perennial grain and seed crops and researching ecologically intensified polycultures that mimic natural systems. In the next forty years, we intend to develop an agricultural system featuring perennials with the ecological stability of the prairie and a grain and seed yield comparable to that from annual crops. Through such a system, we can produce ample human food and reduce or eliminate impacts from the disruptions and dependencies of industrial agriculture."

Breaking news: according to Wes, they have succeeded. Their research scientists have developed new variants of wheat and rice and other grains that can grow and yield year after year without needing to annually uproot, reseed and disrupt the complex soil system

This may well lead to a new era of sustainable food production. It may save the world.

If it does, then we may also hope for another breakthrough in plant breeding and genetic engineering: warm-blooded plants. So physicist Freeman Dyson writes in an article published recently in *The New York Review of Books*: "The Green Universe: A Vision." He

writes, “The essential new species, enabling Noah’s Ark communities to survive in cold places far from the sun, will be warm-blooded plants. A warm-blooded plant is a species with leaves and flowers and roots and shoots in a central structure, kept warm by sunlight or starlight concentrated onto it by mirrors outside.”

Picture test trials in Antarctica sometime in the next few hundred years. And if it works this means that life can be extended not only to other planets or moons with similar gravitational pull like ours but to comets and asteroids and dust grains. Dyson continues,

“And when life has reached the small objects, it will have achieved mobility. It is easy then for life to hop from one small world to another and spread all over the universe. Life can survive anywhere in the universe where there is starlight as a source of energy and a solid surface with ice and minerals as a source of food.

“Life has been stuck here on earth, waiting for our arrival, for three billion years, immobile in its planetary cage. When humans begin populating the universe with Noah’s Ark seeds, our destiny changes. We are no longer an ordinary group of short-lived individuals struggling to preserve life on a single planet. We are stewards of life on a grander scale, and our destiny is to be creators of a living universe.”

Wow. This is news light years beyond Trump tweets and celebrity divorces. It gets us thinking on a scale of history that sees 10,000 years as a chapter in the 130,000 year history of our species, with a “destiny” that may be to become the midwife of a living universe over the next few billion years.

“Increase our faith!” the disciples asked Jesus. One way to increase faith is to increase our sense of the possible, to enlarge our vision, to dare to think 10,000 years is long enough to do something one way, to dare to raise our eyes toward heaven and imagine new worlds.

If you had faith, Jesus replied to the disciples, even so much as a mustard seed, you could uproot this tree and toss it into the sea. In Matthew’s version of this saying, faith has even more power. Responding to the disciples disappointment in their failure to instantly heal all illness and conquer all evil, Jesus said it was “because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.” (Matthew 17:20).

Faith has power, especially combined with knowledge. But how shall it be used? Why would you want to uproot that tree or move that mountain?

Wes Jackson did part of his speech on Aldo Leopold’s famous saying, “think like a mountain.” He noted that the context of the remark was about how we are prone to short-sighted problem-solving thinking, instead of long-range ecological, holistic thinking. The rancher has a problem, wolves are eating his calves. So he kills the wolves. Now unchecked numbers of cattle and native deer ravage the mountainside vegetation, leading to increased erosion. If you were able to think like a mountain, you would not come up with such a short-sighted solution.

And the problem is not just short-sighted thinking, but also strictly utilitarian thinking: of what use is this creature, even this person, to me? Rather than relational thinking: how are we all in this together, how we can we make this world, this place work for all of us together, as an interdependent web of life—including soils and air and water?

As people of faith, we will also add the transcendent dimension: how can we all be fruitful and joyful parts of God's creation, reflecting God's love, to God's glory?

St Paul put the first thing first in his famous oration on love in the 13th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians: "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). We can return to the garden of Eden, no longer needing to work the thorny soil by the sweat of our brows; we can colonize planets and spread life to the stars; but if we do not have love, we are nothing. And without God, it will come to nothing. For ultimately God is the power that drives the green fuse of life (hat tip to Dylan Thomas). And God is love (1 John 4:8).

Dante at the end of his journey, as the [*Divine Comedy*](#) draws to its magnificent closing vision of God, sings of "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" ([*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle; Paradiso*](#) 33:45). Love it is, beyond mere gravity, that makes the world move toward a consummation, the marriage of heaven and earth. For love is the ultimate power of creation.

Faith, hope and love. These three. And the greatest of these is love. Increase our faith, enlarge our vision of the possible. Give us hope and wisdom to use our knowledge well. And most of all, Lord, we pray, increase our love.

In Christ's name, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY