

Sermon – Luke 17:5-10; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
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“Faith to Move Mulberries”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. This past Friday, Grace School students participated in our annual Walk with Grace event, our walkathon, raising money to support our school and collecting food to support Beyond Hunger’s efforts to feed those in need of food assistance in our community. Having brought in food items themselves, our students also walked through our neighborhood, collecting food that had been set out by residents. Our older students walked several miles! Not wanting to miss all the fun, and to be in solidarity with our students, I went for a walk, too. I made it all the way from my office to 7-Eleven! A pastor needs a soda once in a while, you know. My red tie-dye Walk with Grace t-shirt caught the eye of the woman who at the counter, giving me the chance to tell her about what our school was up to that day, how we were living out our faith and serving others. Our students, down to the very smallest among them, were doing precisely that, walking as witnesses to God’s love and as servants of their neighbors. Such small simple acts. A t-shirt. A walk. An invitation to give. But small things add up. The kids raised over \$30,000 and collected lots and lots of food. Small things add up.
2. I am encouraged by such acts of faithful service because the world we live in so often threatens to overwhelm our faith; or at least mine, anyway. Add our voices to the cry of the disciples: “Increase our faith!” The prophet Habakkuk speaks for us, too: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not

listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?" How do we keep the faith in the midst of a violent world? This was the question on the prophet's heart. Habakkuk lived and worked during a time of geopolitical upheaval and military conquest, and the Kingdom of Judah was in the crosshairs of Egypt to the west and Babylon to the east. In the end, it would be Babylon that conquered God's people, destroyed the Temple, and sent them into exile. How does one keep the faith when this is happening before their eyes in real time? Habakkuk leans deeply into lament, giving full expression to his doubt, his fear, his despair. How long, O Lord?

3. Lament is a language of honest, a language that gives voice to what many of us are feeling in these days. Days of violence. Days that see war continue in Gaza, although do we now perhaps dare to hope for peace? Closer to home, these are days that see the federalization of National Guard troops. Days that see excessive force used against protestors. Days that see federal agents descend upon apartment buildings in the dark of night, dragging people, dragging children, from their bed and homes into the street, loading them into U-Haul vans. Days that overwhelm us as we wonder how we got here, as we ask how we can make a difference. How long, O Lord? Lord, increase our faith!
4. In response to his disciples' cry, Jesus tells them that if they have faith the size of a mustard seed, they'll be able to move . . . a mulberry tree? Perhaps you were expecting a mountain? That's how Matthew tells it. I mean, why would one even want to move a mulberry tree? As I learned in our Cornerstones Bible study this week, there's good reason to move yourself *away* from a mulberry tree. After all, while we are not big mulberry eaters, birds are. I was given the sage advice to avoid parking my car under a mulberry tree due to the inevitable mess from above. And while this may indeed provide an apt metaphor for the world we live in, I think Jesus is up to something else. Or down to something else, perhaps. Down under the

ground, to the parts of the tree we cannot see. Mulberry trees have particularly deep and extensive root networks. There's your metaphor; for what are we dealing with, what have we helped create, if not a deep tangle of violence and hate, racism and bigotry, enmity and division, all wrapped up in the intractable network of sin and death?

5. This mulberry of sin and death is what needs moving. And it is precisely this deeply-rooted tangle that Jesus says we, with a little faith, can move. Not on our own, of course. We are too caught in the roots. But Jesus knows where he's headed as he has this conversation. He is on his long journey to Jerusalem, to a different tree. Not a fruit-laden mulberry but a rough-hewn cross. The deep roots of sin and death, wielded by empire, will pull him under. But not for long. In the Father's faithfulness, the Son will be raised. Death is undone. The Spirit, poured out now upon creation, gives us the mustard seed of faith we could never quite muster on our own. This faith calls us to get to work as servants of the Servant, rising each day to do our part in untangling the mess in which we find ourselves. Jesus tells us that with this faith, we can do the work before us. You'll note he does not say how long it will take! It is not magic. It is work. But it is good work. And it is shared work, the work of a community that cries out not for "my" faith, but for "our" faith, to increase.
6. Faith. It doesn't need to be big, or arrogant, or certain. Faith has room for doubt, for heartbreak, for lament. Faith keeps us going, anyway. Gives us space for joy, for hope, for love. And faith, as the late Rachel Held Evans reminds us, is always a risk. We might be wrong. But "the story of Jesus," she writes, "is the story I'm willing to risk being wrong about." Friends, the story of Jesus is the triumph of life, the outbreak of peace, the merciful embrace of the other, the hope we have for the next world, and for this world, too. Keep the faith, friends, as Jesus keeps you. Even if it feels small. After all, it adds up. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.