

Once great among nations, she has become like a widow.

Once a queen over provinces, she has become a slave.

²She weeps bitterly in the night, her tears on her cheek.

None of her lovers comfort her.

All her friends lied to her; they have become her enemies.

³Judah was exiled after suffering and hard service.

She lives among the nations; she finds no rest.

All who were chasing her caught her—

right in the middle of her distress.

⁴Zion's roads are in mourning; no one comes to the festivals.

All her gates are deserted. Her priests are groaning,

her young women grieving. She is bitter.

⁵Her adversaries have become rulers; her enemies relax.

Certainly the LORD caused her grief because of her many wrong acts.

Her children have gone away, captive before the enemy.

⁶Daughter Zion lost all her glory.

Her officials are like deer that can't find pasture.

They have gone away, frail, before the hunter.

The word of the Lord.

We can understand the Jewish people lamenting their loss when Babylon overran their homeland and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon, but what about us today.

We lament over the damage and destruction and deaths from Hurricane Ian. We lament over gun violence and mass shootings. We lament over pandemics. We lament over the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We lament over diseases such as cancer. We lament over the division that we see in America. And the list goes on and on as to things we lament over.

We live in a world that is uncomfortable with feelings of deep sorrow, regardless of the loss. National tragedies threaten to render communities speechless. The collective grief can be overwhelming.

In response, people often gather to sing songs, pray, light candles, and mourn together. Poetry and songs, in the context of ritual, become vehicles for humans to express their sorrow. It is in this rehearsal of mourning a community finds its voice in the midst of suffering. Thus, in response to a catastrophe, people gather at

⁶The 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.

⁷“Would any of you say to your servant, who had just come in from the field after plowing or tending sheep, ‘Come! Sit down for dinner?’ ⁸Wouldn’t you say instead, ‘Fix my dinner. Put on the clothes of a table servant and wait on me while I eat and drink. After that, you can eat and drink?’ ⁹You will not thank the servant because the servant did what you asked, will you? ¹⁰In the same way, when you have done everything required of you, you should say, ‘We servants deserve no special praise. We have only done our duty.’”

May God bless our hearing of his holy word. Amen.

The point for us is that faith depends not on ourselves but is given and sustained by God.

The apostles' request, "Increase our faith!" seems to come out of nowhere. We can understand how they feel. Not because we feel guilty when prayers are not answered, even when they seem like a reasonable requests. These days we think more about our earnest prayers and desires for action in the face of mass shootings, Christian nationalism, racism, and mental health crises. Any apostle might feel justified in thinking more faith is the answer, or at least that it could not hurt. The mission seems too big and too hard for us.

I have never attempted to move a mulberry tree (or any other kind of tree) by my faith. Instead, I have used a shovel. On the other hand, I have hoped for some difficult things to change like illnesses cured, relationships mended, or peace on earth. Sadly, people still die, and ends come instead of reconciliation. Is it because my faith is lacking that these things seem to remain the same. Do I have the faith of even the size of a mustard seed? I do not believe that I am alone in echoing the disciple’s plea for more faith. It is likely that we have all had that feeling, even often.

Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem, healing and teaching *en route*. Traveling with him are disciples and apostles (Luke sometimes distinguishes the two). Crowds gather, people seek healing, and challengers seek answers. Occasional literary signposts intensify the long shadow of the cross that hovers over the entire journey.

Our passage is framed by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus on one side, and the Samaritan leper who returns to give thanks on the other. It constitutes the second half of a four-part series of loosely connected teachings related to discipleship, which may be summarized thus: (1) Do not be the cause of another's sin (Greek *skandalon*, stumble); (2) Forgive, again; (3) Miniscule faith is sufficient; (4) Discipleship is not about reward: Just do it!

If having "faith" — even faith the size of a mustard seed (and a mustard seed is a very small seed) — means having one's thoughts, feelings, and actions wholly transformed by God's reign in our midst. Then it entails being a "slave" of God: one wholly devoted to the richness of God's purposes in the world. Since God's life is immeasurable, its generosity eludes any of our attempts to manipulate it — either as a power we can control or as a means for justifying or rewarding ourselves. This is why we are "worthless slaves": those to whom nothing is owed (17:10). We serve in the banquet of God's kingdom simply because of who we are, or more importantly, because of the One to whom we belong.

Jesus, ever the teacher, creatively shares the essentials for cultivating a strong faith. Faith cannot be quantified on a line graph, as if saying "I have 25% more faith this year than last year!" Faith does not increase like magic. It is felt and known through lived experiences. This can only come through practice, in those challenging moments when faith is put to the test. I do not mean "test" in the sense that you pass or fail, but that you move forward with a concrete step in the justice-seeking and peacemaking way of Jesus, with a discerning heart, regardless of uncertainty, worry, or fear.

Finally, we must bear in mind the previous verses: the apostles have asked Jesus to "increase our faith" (verse 5) in response to Jesus' extraordinary directive about forgiveness (verses 3-4). Jesus, however, assures them that even a mustard-seed faith will prove sufficient (verse 6). Jesus then offers the slave metaphor *as a way of situating his forgiveness directive among the everyday tasks of discipleship*. What the apostles hear as an extraordinary case of discipleship is, in fact, quite ordinary. Forgiving the most repetitive (but repentant) sinner is more extraordinary than the slave tending the sheep or preparing dinner.

Faith comes not from within — as if it is a thing for us to whip up into some invincible force when needed. Faith comes from the One whose power masters the universe — and thus most certainly any difficulty that life may throw our way. When we feel like our faith is not enough, open our eyes of faith to perceive

instead the height and depth and invincibility of you – the source and strength of our faith and all that is.

Thanks be to God for sending us His son whom we can lean on for our faith.
Amen.