

***Increase Our Faith***

October 6, 2019

Pastor Scott Austin

[artisanchurch.com](http://artisanchurch.com)

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Congregant reading scripture]

And now I'd like to read to you the Gospel reading for today and that comes from Luke 17 verses 5-10: 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.

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Ok, so how many people, show of hands, got a warm fuzzy feeling from that Gospel reading that we just heard? [Laughter] Ok, let the podcast show there are no hands in the air. That's a pretty challenging bit of scripture, isn't it? In just six short verses Jesus probably managed to confuse you, make you angry, and possibly insult you, right? I mean to summarize: if we had even a tiny speck of faith we would all be a miracle workers, slavery apparently doesn't bother Jesus very much, and we should all be glad to work ourselves to the bone and call ourselves worthless and not expect very much in return. Did I summarize that well enough? What a great way to kick off a new sermon series, right? We are doing that today -- we're starting a new teaching series -- called "On the Road with Jesus" and despite that inauspicious beginning, I'm actually really excited for the next two months that we're going to spend looking at the Gospel readings in the lectionary. So we always... well not always, but for a great long time now have been getting our scripture passages from the lectionary, just a weekly assignment of texts to read from the Bible. It makes it nice and easy to know what to expect, at least biblically, when we get into the room together. So for the next two months, all of October and November, this is going to take us all the way to the start of Advent, we're going to be looking at the gospel

## **2019-10-06 Increase Our Faith**

readings in the lectionary. And the concept here is that I want us to kind of imagine ourselves to be among Jesus's disciples, travelers with the teacher is the series subtitle.

So, sometimes we're going to be experiencing an event that happens in the life and ministry of Jesus, sometimes we're going to be hearing Jesus give a teaching of some kind or another. And right away I can give you one reassurance, for today's text and all the other ones that are going to annoy you in the next eight or nine weeks, if you find Jesus's teachings sometimes hard to understand or hard to accept, then you're not alone. I mean you're not alone because we're all here in this together, but you're also not alone, kind of historically; his original audience felt the same way quite frequently. His disciples were constantly confused about what he meant. The religious establishment and the state authorities felt so threatened by him that ultimately he was put to death. So, abandoned by his friends and put to death because of the words that he was teaching and the things that he was doing. So, I would actually say it like this: if we were not ever challenged by Jesus' teaching, if what Jesus has to say or do never makes us feel uncomfortable, that would probably be a sign that we were missing the point. And it's quite easy to miss the point of what Jesus is saying and doing.

If you were here before the service started today you may have seen a worship meditation that was on the screen, something from a book that I'm reading by Amy Jill Levine who's actually a Jewish scholar, whose expertise is the era of Jewish history where Jesus was a Jewish rabbi. And what she says is our reaction to the parables -- but you could say all of the teachings of Jesus -- should be one of resistance rather than acceptance. If we hear a parable and think, "I really like that" or worse fail to take any challenge, then we are not listening well enough. So, if we're going to follow Jesus and learn we're not always going to like it. So, I'm hoping that this series will not just be about learning the specific lessons that Jesus has for us from his life and teaching, but I actually also want this very much, I want this to be about learning how to listen better, in other words, learning how to learn from the Scriptures. Learning how to learn, right, it's very meta.

So, today let's use this passage from Luke and maybe see if we can find the right combination of learning from Jesus and then learning how to learn from Jesus. Right, these two things are always going to push and pull on each other. I don't want you to come away with the idea that unless you have this very academic scholarly ability, or unless you know the Bible backwards and forwards from Genesis on down to Revelation, as they say, that you can't understand Jesus. I actually think you can understand Jesus even with no outside knowledge whatsoever Jesus can speak to you. But if you start to do some of that extra study and work and digging and

## **2019-10-06 Increase Our Faith**

start to know more of what Jesus has to say, then you will find deeper layers of meaning and this can be and should be a life-long process.

So, wherever you are on our little journeys with Jesus here, here's one guideline that I think will help us all understand Jesus better, especially when we come across something very challenging or unsettling like with the one we're dealing with today from Luke 17. Here it is, it's very simply that you have to consider the other stuff that Jesus has said about that topic. This is kind of like basic level stuff. So, if you think of Jesus's teachings as a whole body of work rather than as disconnected little things that stand on their own, it will begin to make more and more sense to you. So, compare this, if you will, to your favorite artists, right, maybe it's a musician, maybe it's a painter, maybe it's a writer, if you are really obsessed with Botticelli or Beyonce, then you will be the type of person who knows how their early work compares to their later work, right. How their use of color, or negative space, or lyrics, or instrumental arrangements tend to contribute to the overall message of their work. And anybody who is a big fan of music or is an art lover or a bookworm, anybody who's had any kind of experience with a voice that evolves over time and that has many opportunities for you to receive that voice, knows that this is true. You have to compare and contrast what's being said here with what might have been said earlier or later about that same topic or idea. And it's no different with Jesus.

So, I would say, at a minimum, to take this next step of understanding, we should be looking at the relevance or related stuff that Jesus has said in the same book that we're in at a given moment, which happens to be the Gospel of Luke right now, because don't forget that does present an editorial layer for all of Scripture, right. But you could even go the next step and start to look at other books of the Bible, in the case of the gospels, we have four different authors who have told us the story of Jesus in four different ways. And their various perspectives are going to provide some color for which stories are told in which way, in which order, with a certain degree of detail and all that kind of stuff, right.

By the way, something that really like just lit me up this week and I've been doing this kind of thing long enough that I don't know if I've never understood this before or thought about this before, I don't know why, but here's something that occurred to me. You have in the Gospels instances where the same story is told more than once, our story today is actually one of those instances, and that could possibly be because two separate authors or three or even four, in some cases, are describing the same exact event in different ways, from different perspectives. That provide all kinds of interesting things to consider. But, something that occurred to me this week is Jesus was an itinerant teacher, he taught all over. He probably told these stories many, many times and a good storyteller is going to adapt them for their audience. So, if Jesus is teaching in this town to this group of people he would teach this way and then it might be days,

## 2019-10-06 *Increase Our Faith*

or weeks, or months later teaching the same lesson in a different place to different people and have different emphases. So, that's another way of explaining these, so called, contradictions between the stories in the gospels, right.

So then, let's go to this passage we all heard and read a minute ago in Luke 17. So, if we were to make a short list of words or topics from that brief passage that would be good opportunities for us to dig deeper and see what else Jesus said about them, what would be on that list? And I want you to shout some answers at me, and I want to see if you come up with the same kind of list that I did. By the way, if you don't, were going forward with my list, but... [Laughter] So, you heard the story, right? From what you remember, what are some things, or images, or words that we could dig deeper and look for what else Jesus said about it? Shout it out.

[Congregant]

Analogies for faith.

[Pastor Scott]

Ok analogies for faith, stuff about faith. Thank you, yes, what else?

[Congregant]

Slavery

[Pastor Scott]

Slavery. Absolutely some of us are very curious what's going on there. Yes, what else?

[Congregant]

Taking care of one another.

[Pastor Scott]

Taking care of one another, interesting.

[Congregant]

The sheep.

[Pastor Scott]

**2019-10-06 Increase Our Faith**

The sheep.

[Congregant]

Your duty as a worker.

[Pastor Scott]

Duty as a worker, might be interesting to see where else Jesus talks about workers, yeah. What else?

[Congregant]

Thinking that we're nothing.

[Pastor Scott]

Thinking that we're nothing. Ok, the idea of debasing ourselves, maybe. What we're saying?

[Congregant]

Who is able to come to the table and eat the meal?

[Pastor Scott]

Who is able to come to the table and eat the meal, or maybe just meals in general. Anything else? You've covered my list, well, actually you're missing one from my list, but anything else?

[Congregant]

Jesus.

[Pastor Scott]

Jesus. Yes, the answer is always Jesus [Laughter] Yeah.

So, let's talk about faith for a minute. That was something Dan shouted out, right? Here's some of the things, not everything, but some of the things that Jesus said about faith, just in the Gospel of Luke, ok. Remember there's a story where he's on the boat and there's a storm and the people are worried, he says to them, "where is your faith?" There's a number of occasions in the Gospels where somebody comes to him for healing of some sort and he says, "your faith has saved you" or "your faith has healed you" or made you well or "your sins are forgiven

## 2019-10-06 *Increase Our Faith*

because of your faith.” There's the occasion where he says to the people, “oh you of little faith” or in the King James English, “o ye of little faith.” (Ye is just the plural “you” did you know that?) Don't you trust God to clothe you and feed you like God clothes and feeds the sparrows and all that stuff? He says something like, whoever is faithful in little, will be faithful in much. One time he called the crowd “you faithless generation.” Not very polite, in my opinion, but he said it, right? So, the point is: faith is a big broad topic. It's definitely worthy of its own study. We're not going all the way down that road today for obvious reasons - we would be here forever. But there are different ways that we might understand what faith even is - just based on the teachings of Jesus - just in the Gospel of Luke. Do you see how fun this could get? So keep that in mind.

Here's something else that you... I don't think anybody said mustard seeds, did you? Jesus said - When they said Lord increase our faith - if you had faith the size of a mustard seed you could make this mulberry bush walk off into the sea or something along those lines. That's a fair paraphrase I think. Did he say anything else about mustard seeds anywhere else in the Gospels?

[indistinct audience response]

That's right! He told the parable of the Mustard Seed. It's just two little verses in the Gospel of Luke, so I can read them to you now. It's in Chapter 13:18-19 “What is the kingdom of God like, and to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden. It grew and became a tree and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.” Now entire books have been written about the parable of the mustard seed in its various tellings. There's two other tellings of this parable in the Gospels. One in the Gospel of Matthew and one of the Gospel of Mark. And they have different details in them and if you want to go deep in on the on the parable of the mustard seed you could spend lots of time. There's lots of books that have been written about that. But on its face I think it's a fairly simple concept that Jesus is putting forth which is that something very small grows into something very big. And that is in some way what the Kingdom of God is like. So later on when his disciples say increase our faith and he says if you had faith the size of a mustard seed - and by the way it's not just the disciples in this story it's the *Apostles*. The Apostles were like the super disciples. They were the 12 that he gathered together to be closest to him. So that matters too. It's one of many things that I'm going to say, we don't have time to go down that road very far but it fascinates me too that this, this particular teaching which is very difficult for us, seems like it was only given to the inner circle. That matters too. At any rate, they would have known the parable of the mustard seed because he would have told it at least once. And based on the theory I presented earlier

## **2019-10-06 Increase Our Faith**

they probably heard it many times, so the mustard seed would not have been new information for them.

Ok let's talk about slaves. By the way the Greek word for slave is *doulos* and it also means servant. Different translations of the Bible choose to say either slave or servant. It is probably worth noting that even if it was - even if Jesus was talking about actual slaves - that slavery in the ancient near East was a different type of thing than the slavery that is in our history. Not to excuse in any sense the fact that one human being would own another human being. But it's very difficult I think, for us as Americans to to hear that word without having a lot of very justifiably inflammatory kind of reactions to it. But Jesus told many stories involving slaves and the one thing is that he often elevated them in the stories. This is this is a thing you could go study for sure and spend weeks on: What did Jesus just teach about slaves? How did he use slaves in - as - the subjects of stories? There's also a poignant narrative in the Gospel of Luke where he heals the slave of a Roman centurion, which for a Jewish rabbi has several layers of problems.

But there's one thing in particular that might be of use to us today. This comes from Chapter 12 and it's a story of a master returning home. And the key line in the story comes from verse 37. He says "Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat and he will come and serve them." Do you see the contrast between that teaching and the response that he gave them in today's reading? It's basically the opposite. And this in turn is going to evoke some of the other teachings of Jesus. Not necessarily about slaves in particular, but things that have the same kind of inversion of the social order that you find in that story. In Chapter 14 Jesus is talking about finding your place at the table and you know you descend from the host in order of importance basically, right? And he tells them no. All who exalt themselves, in other words, lift themselves up, will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. He also said very famously some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last. And then again in chapter 18 he says the same thing about being exalted and being humbled, right? So that's that's something that clearly was one of his go to ideas.

So in light of all this let me propose for us a possible way to think about today's challenging passage. Now when Jesus says the thing about the mustard seed: if you had enough faith, the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry bush going into the sea. He goes on to say: who among you would say to your slave come and sit down? No it's the other way around. It sounds at first to our ears as if he is saying obviously you would never say to your slave come and sit down at the table and I will serve you! But given what he said about that exact type of exchange earlier in his ministry I wonder if what he is saying is more like: how many of you are

## **2019-10-06 Increase Our Faith**

being transformed enough by the renewal of your minds that you understand that the last shall be first enough to embody that kingdom truth here on earth? Do you see what I'm saying? I wonder if the phrasing that we get makes us think that he means one thing when actually he means another which would be perhaps more consistent with the other things Jesus has taught. And he goes on to say since - in my in my reimagining of this - since that is the arrangement of the kingdom - first last, last first, exalted humble, humble exalted - you should seek to become more like a servant or even more like a slave. What if he's saying to them: increase your faith? You want me to increase your faith? Faith doesn't come in sizes. A grain of faith is enough, it's all you need. What if the thing about the mulberry bush is that like you should expect to work literal miracles based on tiny bit of faith, but it's just it's just a hyperbolic way of saying all you need is a little bit. Don't ask me for more than you have, you're asking for the wrong thing. What you lack is not faith but faithfulness. Because remember you won't be entrusted with something big until you've shown that you can be entrusted with something small. And if you want to increase you should actually be thinking about decreasing. What if that's what Jesus is getting at in this text?

So now instead of a teaching that seems harsh and leaves us feeling like our inadequacies - whether they are inadequacies of faith or the amount of our effort or the amount of our self flagellation. What if instead of feeling like our inadequacies are holding us back from a full spiritual experience, we instead have a teaching from Jesus that reminds us that it is our very smallness, our very inadequacies, that prepare us to receive the fullness of God's blessing? Now it's not that the idea of making ourselves smaller is necessarily going to give us that warm fuzzy feeling that maybe we want when we go to Jesus. It's still a message that upends our sense of how important we are, and how much depends on our own strength or even our own character. It's still a message that tells powerful, well established people with no problems in their life who already feel secure that their foundation isn't as strong as they thought. But I do think that perhaps this ends up feeling a little bit like... a little bit less like we're being scolded by Jesus for not believing enough, and starts to feel much more like an invitation into a way of life where our own personal transformation contributes to the transformation and the renewal of the world around us. And so hopefully you are left not deflated by your failure to measure up but inspired by the hopeful realisation that you can begin to participate in God's Kingdom right now. From wherever you are.

There's one last concept in this teaching from Luke 17 that shows up in other places in the Scriptures, shows up in other places in the Gospel of Luke, and that's the concept of a meal. Once again this would be a wonderful area of Jesus's life to study more because so much of his ministry happened around the table. So much of his teaching imagined a table but the key moment in his ministry, and the pinnacle moment of our liturgy happens to involve a meal too.



## **2019-10-06 Increase Our Faith**

And that of course is Holy Communion. The Lord's Supper. And it's told in the Gospel of Luke, in chapter 22. So let me read to you that story now. When the hour came he took his place at the table and the Apostles with him he said to them: I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. And he took a cup and after giving thanks he said: take this and divide it among yourselves, for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes. And he took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them saying: this is my body which is given for you do this in remembrance of me. And he did the same with the cup after supper saying: This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

And so it's my joy to invite you to the table of Jesus. To invite each of you to come and receive this gift of grace that he offers to us, that he offered to his original disciples, his apostles. If you're seeking to follow Jesus you are welcome at this table. You don't have to be a member of our church. If it's your 500th time here or your 1st time here or anywhere in between. You don't have to be a member of any church, you simply have to be seeking to follow Jesus and trusting him. And so I invite you to come and take a piece of the bread, dip it in one of the cups. We have juice, we have wine, choose the one that's best for you and receive it right there at the table. We're going to continue to sing together. May it be for you the real presence of Jesus The Savior. May it be an act of unity with each other, of communion. And may it be a remembrance, not only of the sacrifice Jesus made, but of the teachings he gives us as we begin to embark on this journey with him. So our table is open, let's continue to worship Him. I invite you to come.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](http://ArtisanChurch.com).