

“Faith with a Side of Mustard”
Sermon by Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
July 30, 2017

Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Every city has a street food it is famous for; in Mexico I had tacos; in China I had *bao*; in Paris I had a baguette with butter and ham, and in England I had fish and chips. New York City has many varieties including kabob, sweet warmed nuts, and of course hot dogs. Chicago, where I lived for 8 years, is probably most famous for hot dogs as its street food, but to eat a Chicago dog properly one must follow the rules. The quintessential Chicago hot dog should be ordered “dragged through the garden” which means it has mustard, chopped white onions, bright green pickled relish, a dill pickle spear, peppers and celery salt-- although, thankfully, any one of those ingredients is at least acceptable if you don’t want the whole garden on your dog. As long as you do not order ketchup. You must not order ketchup! During this summer’s National Hot Dog Week, Heinz tried to troll Chicago by providing giant green pump dispensers labeled “Heinz Chicago Hot Dog Sauce.” It was actually ketchup, much to hard-core Chicagoans’ ire.

But mustard is acceptable by Chicago’s standards, and apparently by Jesus’ standards too. He gives the metaphor of the mustard seed of faith-- even though it is the smallest of seeds, this tiniest of seeds grows to be the greatest of shrubs, a home in its branches for nesting birds.

If mustard seed faith is acceptable by Jesus’ standards, it does not seem so far-fetched that what you or I might offer could be something Jesus could work with. In his parables, Jesus does not describe God in ways that

slip out of our reach. He does not outline temple ritual procedures. Jesus does not give long-winded speeches on Bible verses the crowds cannot even read. He does not explore the secrets of the holy of holies. Instead, he uses street-food accessibility in describing who God is and how to reach God. Things you might have in the cupboard: mustard seed, yeast, flour. Something your roughened hand has probably handled: a fishing net, ropey and wet. Something small and shiny that your eyes and probably your hands have beheld-- a creamy, iridescent pearl.

Jesus is trying to tell us that God can be felt, observed, or experienced in ordinary, daily life. If I were to write a parable from my own experience, right now it would be from unpacking boxes after a move. “The realm of heaven is like a favorite pair of jeans that has been missing for two years. When a woman who has just moved *for the third time* in 18 months finally unpacked a box that had been in storage since she moved from Chicago, she pulled out a this forgotten pair and tried them on. When the jeans showed they still remember the shape of her body, there was great rejoicing and looking in the mirror! Even more so, God has room for *you* in heaven; God’s love is familiar and is waiting to be rediscovered.

However, sometimes in our ordinary, daily lives, our mustard seeds of *doubt* take root in us and grow to claim more space than any planting of faith. In the purple Question Cards I have asked people to write over these last months, I did not get a lot of questions of faith or statements of doubt.

However, I did get some interesting ones:

-Is there life after death?

-Resurrection does not make sense to me.

-What happened to the people who lived before Jesus? Does their spiritual connection to God have any less meaning?

-Can the God we worship be known in other forms and experiences than we know in our Christian faith?

-One of our children asked “Why did they kill Jesus?”

In addition to these, questions I have heard from people throughout my ministry are these:

-Why can I not feel close to God?

-Does God really love me?

-Is God powerful? Is God good? If God is both powerful and good, then why do we see and experience such suffering in the world?

Rather than answer so many questions in one sermon, I have written down these questions and put them on the ark; I will ask that you take time to put a check by which question or questions you would like to hear addressed from the pulpit, or you can add your own question. If there is not a clear front-runner, we could have a second hour after worship to discuss these questions next week.

Sometimes, things happen outside of the ordinary, daily events of our lives that call us to question God. I told you in my weekly email blast on Wednesday that I was traveling to Atlanta to be with my family because my uncle died suddenly. What I did not say was that Uncle Jack died because he killed himself with a gun. Words fall short in expressing the sadness my family held together as we grappled with this loss of my uncle, and in particular the way he died as we imagined the kind of pain he must have been in to leave us like that.

Now I will be the first to tell you that I am a Southerner. I am not sure what your cultures tell you, but the way I was raised in the South was that you do not air your family's dirty laundry. In other words, I was taught that if your family has problems, you do your best to keep it a secret, smile and say "everything's fine!" But I am telling you about my uncle because I want to help lift the veil of shame from mental illness and depression. Secrecy, denial and isolation make great breeding grounds for mental health problems.

My uncle had said he did not want a funeral. However, my family craved some kind of ritual experience but did not have words to say what exactly they needed, And so I was humbled as I considered what I could possibly offer to this family that was aching and confused.

We ended up gathering in my sister's home. We created space for my family to lament the pain my uncle was in, both physically and emotionally. We lamented that my cousins especially still need their dad in ways he will now not be able to provide.

And then we began telling stories and sharing memories of my uncle's life. In between tears we were also laughing and passing pictures around. Our sharing reminded us that we had decades of memories of my uncle where he was laughing and loving and engaged; the tragedy of his last days did not have to be the only lens through which we remembered him.

After our sharing of memories, I asked that we bless each of my cousins and my dad, who was uncle Jack's brother, by naming some of the wonderful traits we saw of Jack in each of them. We honored the seeds Uncle Jack left in them, seeds that could grow into something significant and flavorful and useful to the world beyond themselves.

And when the time of blessing was over, we shared in a toast of rainbow and lime sherbet, my uncle's favorite dessert. Holding that creamy sweetness in our mouths physically gave us something tangible to savor of Uncle Jack. It reminded us that he left us with so much more than the fear, pain and confusion of his last tormented days.

I am convinced of God's love for my uncle, even if he may not have felt it at the end. God's love is generous and extends even beyond the grave, and so I believe my uncle Jack still has the opportunity to receive God's love and feel like it is enough. Jesus' parables lead me to believe so. As much as we can relate to the joy of discovering a treasure in a field or finding a

pearl revealed in an oyster shell, as much as we can taste the robustness of a tiny mustard seed, and let these experiences point us to God, we should remember that God seeks us out too. The parables speak of God as a Shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep just to find the one sheep who has strayed. The parables speak of God as a woman, a Widow, who has lost a coin and sweeps the whole house up and down until she finds that lost coin, and rejoices with extravagance upon the finding of it. God takes delight in finding *us* even as the parables tell us of our own joy in finding God.

Paul in Romans tells us that the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. In my moments of deepest grief, I have walked around feeling like I need to yawn but cannot. It's not that I am short of breath as much as I am *greedy* for breath. I just need it so much and cannot be satisfied with regular amounts because the burdens I carry need more. I guess you could say I am greedy for God. I wish Uncle Jack could have known that God was in his breath, trying to intercede for him. Maybe he did know and that just was not enough. But I am sure God is not done with him, or with us, yet.

Paul asks, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I listen to Paul's words and know that nothing can stop God's relentless pursuit of us. May that kind of love take root in you and in me. Amen.