

BREAD OF THE WORLD

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on October 3, 2010
Crossroads United Church

Psalm 137 **Luke 17:5-10**

Ernest Hemmingway once said, "All true stories end in death." I do not know the context of his remark, nor can I recall for sure the context wherein I heard the line. But it has stayed with me: sometimes haunting me, sometimes taunting me and sometimes comforting me. It haunts me in the wake of an accident or diagnosis when as a minister and as a human being I am conflicted over what to hope and what to pray for. It comforts me because rather than hearing Hemmingway as cynical I hear him reminding us of authentic life which ends, as we know it, in death.

This is true for all of us regardless of our age, status, successes or challenges: the story of our lives will end in death. And while we may see death as an angel that stands at the portal of what was and what yet shall be, and the very bridge that spans life as we know it and the life to come, or whether we see death as an enemy to be outrun and outsmarted this truth remains: all true stories-that is the stories of those of us who are flesh and blood and not merely characters in a novel- will culminate in death. Indeed, the character in a work of fiction may know an immortality that not one of us is likely to ever know. It may well be that the wisdom of Hemmingway provides the believer with the mustard seed of faith that sustains, fortifies and empowers when we find ourselves weeping by the Rivers of Babylon of change and uncertainty.

I am privileged to stand on holy ground with saints-some that cross the threshold of the sanctuary and those who do not- and I am often awed and humbled by the faith and courage that is embodied in those who stand at the portal of life and death. These are the ones who understand that faith the size of a mustard seed can empower and encourage and put them in touch with the power of God. Faith, the size of a mustard seed, becomes the bread that fortifies the soul even as we encroach upon the valley of the shadow and the abyss of uncertainty. It is the bread that strengthens when we are

spent and frightened. The bread that proffers divine hope and encouragement when ordinary hope is scarce. It is the bread of life that dares to believe that we are not forsaken or left desolate even when we face our greatest unknown. It is the bread that leaves us without want or emptiness when we face our final hours. I have seen this as I have been privileged to stand on holy ground with those who have faith the size of a mustard seed going into surgery, and among those who share their room with The Angel of Death.

She was of an age when she should have been feeling the angst of shifting hormones and middle school crushes. And then the doctors said that there was nothing they could do. One moment the world was her oyster and the next she was wrapped in a cocoon of metamorphosis. She was confronted with years diminishing to weeks, and days to hours. She returned home following the devastating news and was greeted by her family who were equally as devastated by the report. They offered food; there was hot soup on the stove but understandably, she was not hungry. A friend told her that her UCW Group had been praying for a man who had received a similar diagnosis and prognosis. It was in his lungs and he was given scant weeks to live and told similarly to set his house in order, and the faithful in the church unit had been praying. His last cat scan had revealed no disease. The young lady thought about it and said, "Your UCW group prayed for him? Would they pray for me?" The family friend responded, "From your diagnosis we have been praying." And then the young person said, "I will have some soup."

It was sufficient to know that she was being prayed for. This mustard seed of faith gave her the strength to join in the fight. If the faithful were behind her and praying then she would do what she could to aid and abet in the process towards wholeness. Again the strength of the mustard seed of faith put all of my theological degrees to shame in comparison. I stood on holy ground and was completely awash in the power of the mustard seed to command mountains and mulberry bushes to get out of the way.

Even the smallest faith in a disciple proffers sustenance enough to cancel out the word impossible. This is the bread of the world that gives strength to those who rise every morning hungry from too little to eat the night before. The same bread that nourishes the soldier to believe in the power and purpose of the unseen even as the mortar explodes. The same mustard seed of faith that inspires hope when the flood waters rise, and the hurricanes wash out roads and bridges. The same mustard seed of faith that encourages the farmer to plant the seeds even in the wake of drought. This is what we celebrate today on World Wide Communion Sunday: the tenacity of the faithful that will not let go even when common sense dictates that we should. Indeed, after we finish working in the fields we come into the household to prepare the supper.

This is what it means to have faith the size of the mustard seed. Diagnosis may still lead to death, but we are not defeated by death. The winds and rains may flatten our cathedras and we rebuild. Our numbers may diminish over time and we reach out to sister congregations, recognizing that we are our brother's and our sister's keeper. We will hold bread the size of a morsel in our hands and this will empower us to dream dreams and have visions of a future that is sure because it is built upon the foundation of faith. It will not necessarily be easy or even predictable. We may find ourselves uncomfortable-not because of want but because of plenty and resistance to change.

We may continue to resist change and may even bury our heads in the sand. Or worse, look backwards to the glory days when life was predictable, but this will surely culminate in death- and death not as a means to resurrection but as an end. There never comes a time in the life of faith when our time of service and commitment to the gospel ends. Perhaps this is the greatest gift that I have received as I have been privileged to stand on holy ground with family, friend, parishioner and stranger. Even as their fight ebbs and their life transitions, to us the mantle of office is thrown to hold high and emblazon on our hearts and souls. This is what it means to live in authenticity. This is what it means to live as Christ in the world.

The mustard seed of faith becomes the bread that fortifies and empowers us to weep with those who weep, and laugh with those who laugh. The mustard seed of faith becomes the bread that sustains in the nighttime of fear, uncertainty and despair. It becomes the food that enables us to let go when the time comes, so that we might still hang on in memory, faith and hope. Thanks be to God. Amen