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Photo by Sr. Karin Nürnberg, CSJ, from the Abbey St. Hildegard in Eibingen, Germany

THE SIZE OF A MUSTARD SEED

By Elisabeth Beall

An Excerpt from Today's Gospel

*The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."
The Lord replied,
"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed,
you would say to this mulberry tree,
'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

LUKE 17:5-6

Reflection

When I was little, I loved to take my mom's charm bracelet from her jewelry box and admire the charms' different colors and sizes, remembering the stories she'd told me about who gave her which one for what occasion.

But bright colors and elegant shapes aside, the charm that most intensely captured my attention was a small globe with a golden frame. The globe could spin within the frame, which made it stand out (none of the other charms had locomotion). And within the globe was a tiny golden mustard seed.

So these verses about faith the size of a mustard seed may be among the first I ever learned. The charm made it easy to visualize the smallness of the faith that is required of us ... but I still puzzled over the whole thing. Where was this mustard seed housed within me? I went to church every weekend, so probably my faith was pretty strong ... but could I seriously move a whole tree with it? And if I was even asking the question, didn't that put into doubt the very existence of my own mustard seed?

These days, the meaning of the mustard seed seems much more straightforward to me – an example of our Creator's eternal generosity. What these verses say to me now is that God understands all too well our human frailty (only fair, since God created us, flaws and all!). God understands that shock, anger, fear, mourning – so many aspects of our experience here on earth can damage or diminish our faith. But what God asks of us is not a mug full of faith, a bucketful of faith, a bathtub of faith in which we paddle placidly. What God asks of us is just faith the size of a mustard seed – smaller than the nail on our smallest finger. And if we can offer that – if we can sustain that – God will make up the difference, meeting us more than halfway.

So when the Apostles call on Jesus to increase their faith, he does not respond with a yes or no; he simply tells them that their faith doesn't need to increase. He tells them that faith the size of a mustard seed is enough.

Now my prayer is neither to grow the size of my faith nor to move a tree by faith alone. It is to nurture the little seed inside me, to sustain my confidence in its tough shell, and to remember that from tiny seeds, flowers, vines, grains and fruits, and even trees miraculously grow.



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For Pondering

- What is the metaphor that best fits your faith -- mustard seed, lamp, anchor, something else?
 - How do you nurture, sustain, or shield your faith?
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For Prayer

*Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Lord is God from of old,
creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary,
and his knowledge is beyond scrutiny.
He gives power to the faint,
abundant strength to the weak.
Though young men faint and grow weary,
and youths stagger and fall,
They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength,
they will soar on eagles' wings;*

*They will run and not grow weary,
walk and not grow faint.*

ISAIAH 40:28-31

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