



“Faith in Tough Times”
Sermon Preached by Ambassador Warren Clark
October 3, 2010
Luke 17:1-10

In the Gospels, Jesus is given two occupational titles. The first is usually translated as carpenter. The other is teacher, rabbi.

We have no description of any object built by Jesus or Joseph, but wow, what a teacher!

Like the good Jewish Rabbi that he was, Jesus of Nazareth could confront and shock to get his point across and aid to the memory of his listeners. He was good not only at asking leading questions (Who is it people say that I am?) but also in using challenging images: We all remember, perhaps with discomfort, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

In our lesson today from Luke, we have more rhetorical hyperbole from Jesus. Somewhat befuddled, Apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith. In the Gospel of Matthew, faith explicitly means the power to heal. Jesus replies sharply, “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.’”

As I am sure you know, the mustard seed is miniscule. Jesus is saying the Apostles have hardly any faith at all.

The Greek word translated “mulberry tree” is sometimes translated “sycamore.” This is not a bush. It is a big tree. Later in Luke (19) the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus, who as short of stature, climbed up to a sycamore tree in Jericho to get a better view of Jesus.

Elsewhere the same kind of hyperbole is used by Jesus in describing faith that is strong enough to move mountains.

Well, I think there are times when we all would like the faith that can uproot a large tree and throw it into the sea. Speaking for myself, right now is one of those times.

Times are tough right now for many people. Here at home unemployment is historically high and unprecedented numbers of people face foreclosure or eviction from their homes. It is the end of the

American dream for them, at least for now. Unemployment and insecurity is a tree they would like to uproot and throw into the sea.

Times are tough now for the immigrant who may face not only a difficult market for his labor but the added threat of deportation, for some even after having lived and worked and paid taxes and even after raising a family in our country. That is a mountain they would like to move out of their way.

It is worth reflecting on a few of the things the Bible tells us about faith.

In Genesis we are told "... Abraham believed the promises of the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." For a long time I was bothered by that word "righteousness." It sounded stuffy, like "self-righteousness." It really just means having a right relationship with God. It means being comfortable that you are OK, feeling that you are on the right track, even though the going is rough and tough. It means being comfortable in your relationship with God and comfortable in your own skin.

So Abraham had faith in God's promise to him of land if Abraham will pack up and go there. It is interesting to note what Abraham got in return. Abraham is promised not only that his descendants will inherit the land, but that they will be "as numerous as the stars in the heaven." In short, the first result of his right relationship with God is about land and blood, getting a good place to earn a living and establish a family.

Note at this stage in the Bible Abraham's reward is a long life. His immortality is his children and descendants. What you see, here and now, is what you get. There is no mention of any afterlife.

I expect most of our forbearer who came to this country, and those among us who are immigrants today, came with much the same kind of faith that God would provide for them in the new land.

In my day job in Washington, DC dealing with the Middle East, I struggle with my own private and public faith and doubt. I wonder if there is still faith that can rip up a great tree or move a mountain. That kind of faith, that ability to heal, is badly needed.

I head a coalition of 23 national church groups and organizations, including the Presbyterian Church (USA). It conducts political advocacy with the Congress and the Administration to support U.S. leadership for reaching an agreement for peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

This has been a discouraging week for those of us hoping for continuation of the direct peace talks that resumed in Washington at the beginning of September. I am not feeling comfortable about this situation. After more than a year of effort by the Obama administration, including steadfast support from the Vice President, we still seem to be far from starting serious talks, much less reaching an agreement.

Israeli-Palestinians peace negotiations illustrate the famous myth of Sisyphus. He rolled that great stone almost to the top of the hill only to have it roll down again at the last minute. That happened many times in the history of these negotiations. It happened to the Vice President in March, and it seems to have happened again to the President this week. Repeated calls for an extension of the so-called freeze in new settlement construction in the West Bank, including a call by the President in the UN General Assembly a week ago Thursday, went unheeded. The press has reported that a bold new offer by the United States for extensive new military and political support for Israel in return for a 60-day extension of the freeze was not accepted by Israel.

Alas, given the history of the past 17 years when negotiations were accompanied by continual loss of Palestinian territory to new settlement construction, and when failure of the negotiations was often accompanied more terrible violence, including deliberate targeting and death of innocents, faith and trust are in short supply.

Nevertheless, I believe this mountain can be moved. This view is not widely shared. The reason is that I believe there are really no other acceptable alternatives and my belief that this President really wants to get an agreement. With persistence, even the gentle but steady pressure from a starfish can open a hard shell of a clam. With enough time, the power of belief and compassion can overcome the hard core of fear.

I am currently working in Washington on a project with the Presbyterian Church to create a multi-faith national time of prayer and action for peace in the Holy Land. The idea is to engage as many people as possible and that faith needs, often needs to be coupled with action.

So what can be done, what can individuals, churches and other institutions do, to help uproot this mulberry tree of fear and conflict?

Bishop Munib Younan, the dynamic Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem, said recently there are three steps we can take to bring religion more into the public sphere in a positive way. Religion needs to be prophetic, to be a catalyst for reconciliation, and to offer peace education.

It is often said there is not peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness. The situation in Israel-Palestine today needs clear prophetic voices that call for security for Israel and justice for Palestinians in order to achieve historic reconciliation. In a rather specific way, it calls for loving those whom you have considered enemies or worse... unimportant.

However, there are only so many things politicians and bureaucrats can do by themselves to bring a just, lasting and comprehensive peace to this region. There must also be a change of heart by many ordinary people, as much on the personal level as among political leaders and diplomats.

There is a fine book about Israeli-Palestinian division and reconciliation called "The Lemon Tree." Some of you also will know of the group known as the Parents Circle. It is made up of Israeli and Palestinian parents who have lost children to the terrible violence. Their pain and tragedy has brought them together to advocate together for compassion and peace. Their joint presentations are powerful to witness. There are many examples of groups in Israel-Palestine working for reconciliation. They should be strengthened.

On a more institutional level, the late Pope John Paul II humbled himself in asking for forgiveness for past actions by the Roman Catholic Church against the Jewish people. Actions such as this go a long way to building the necessary bridges from both sides that can help remove mountains of distrust and bring about reconciliation.

Reconciliation is not for sissies. We all need to learn more about our different stories and respect our different histories. The President is quoted saying we must walk a mile in each others' shoes. Churches can do much help with instruction and example in all these areas.