

Jesus says if we had faith the size of a mustard seed we could make a tree
become something it is utterly incapable of being:
a plant rooted in the middle of the ocean.

I want to tell some stories from the last twenty years
that show what Jesus is talking about because sometimes
God reveals himself to us in memory,
because sometimes there are patterns we can't see in the moment,
patterns that reveal the Holy Spirit moving in surprising ways.

At the time these stories felt deeply broken,
felt much more human than divine.

But when I look back I see the Holy Spirit at work and I see
a lesson for how this parish might live in the next 20 years.

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Twenty years ago the man who would become my mentor
was a finalist for the rector position of two parishes.

One was a progressive parish in Atlanta and the other
was a conservative parish about as OTP as you can get.

The priest was drawn more to the in-town parish
and thought he would be called there,
but they were taking a long time to decide and he was worried about
where his oldest son would start school that fall.

He wasn't willing to make him change schools mid-year,
so he accepted the call to the more conservative parish
and moved forward in his new ministry.

The in-town parish was a little upset with him
but it made their decision easier.

They ended up calling a priest who'd grown up in Atlanta
but served in Los Angeles for the last several years.

That priest's name was Mac Thigpen and he served as rector of
St. Bartholomew's, one of our daughter parishes, from 2002-2016.

In addition to his many priestly gifts, Mac was also the first
openly gay priest called to be rector of a parish in this diocese.
Saying that feels antiquated now, but in 2002,
gay men & women leading the church was a really big issue.

And it only became bigger later that year
when the diocese of New Hampshire elected an openly gay priest
to become their bishop,
and now it was up to our General Convention to vote
whether to approve his election.

If you were around then you probably remember this,
but if not the reason it was such a big deal is that the Episcopal Church,
our tiny little church, became front & center in The Culture Wars.

Our national debate over gay rights coalesced on the vote
we were about to take,
a vote that is normally the most boring vote a person can take.

That summer, though, we were the topic of every news show,
every opinion piece, and your position on the bishop of
New Hampshire felt like a litmus test of your Christianity.

Most of you know we voted to approve his election.

For a few years the church suffered for that vote,
and later we benefited from it even more,
but let's stay with our local parishes.

The more conservative parish - St. Peter's in Rome, GA - was deeply divided,
and one day a group of leaders called the rector to a secret meeting
and said they were considering taking St. Peter's out of
the Episcopal Church and would he go with them?

Their priest - my mentor - was the type who got very prickly
when church folk started having secret meetings,
and he was also deeply principled when it came to human rights.

He managed to shut down their little insurrection before it ever started,
but if he had not ended up at St. Peter's their story might have taken
a very different path.

(By the way, I've always suspected that what really shut it down
was not only his strong moral stance but also their fear
of having to endure the agony of another long rector search.
I mean, theological principles are one thing
but rector searches take FOREVER!)

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Those of you who were here at Holy Trinity back in 2003 know
that we were not of one mind.

Some people were thrilled and others left in anger,
but thanks to the steady leadership of your lay leaders
and your clergy, Holy Trinity quickly carried on
with its life, shaken but not broken.

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Now here's where I make a cameo appearance.

While all of this was going on, young Greg Tallant had just started his discernment for the priesthood and was assigned to a 10-week field placement at St. Bartholomew's.

My first Sunday at St. Bart's was the Sunday after the historic vote. All around the diocese there were parish forums where people expressed their support or outrage or confusion.

But at St. Bart's there was a huge party. A HUGE PARTY!
A celebration of the new thing the Spirit had wrought in the Church.

They broke out the spinners and the incense.
The choir sang glory to God and the organ nearly burst our eardrums.

Mac had been at General Convention and he came back not only to tell them what this meant for the church, but what it meant for him personally.

There were as many tears and hugs of joy on that day as I've ever seen on a Sunday morning.

I was a spectator that day, but the leadership of St. Bart's and of Mac Thigpen imprinted on me the conviction that this new thing was not a heresy or a mistake, not even a painful necessity, but was instead a wonderful and courageous movement of the Holy Spirit to be celebrated.
And over the years I've never lost that conviction.

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St. Peter's didn't stay in that place of opposition for long.

Funny enough, when a group of fundamentalists in Rome
tried to take over a local private school that same year,
St. Peter's was leading the opposition to it.

And 7 years later, when a local college was under attack
by the fundamentalist wing of another church,
St. Peter's again was a leading voice of opposition
of the bullying tactics that cost people their jobs.

And then 5 years after that,
St. Peter's would hold their first wedding between two men.

That wedding happened because Allien & Bill
were devoted leaders at St. Peter's.

Their wedding was without a doubt the social event of the year in Rome,
and best of all the surviving members of that secret meeting
back in 2003 were all there, all grinning from ear to ear
that their beloved brothers in Christ
were being married in their church.

The Holy Spirit was leading Holy Trinity, too.

In 2014 the vestry voted unanimously on a policy that the parish
was already trying to live out.

We voted that there should be no barriers here to any person
who wished to follow Jesus Christ and be a member or leader
of this parish.

And in 2016 the wedding of Nancy and Leanne was as joyful & important
an event for Holy Trinity as Allien and Bill's was for St. Peter's.

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In all 3 parishes a lot of people made a lot of decisions.

Some they were proud of, some they regret,
and some they probably still wonder about.

My mentor didn't see the clouds part and point him to Rome, Georgia.

He needed to know where his son would be in school.

None of us had a dove with an olive branch leading us like Noah
from the storms of the moment to safe and dry land.

What we did was what we always do: we said our prayers
and we tried our best, and that includes those people
who called a secret meeting to leave the church.

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Most days the faith of a mustard seed seems like more
than we are capable of.

Most days making the world a better place seems as unlikely
as a tree walking into the ocean and putting down roots.

But sometimes, when you look back with the eyes of faith,
you can see where God was able to do amazing things
through all of those uncertain little acts of hope, love, & faithfulness.

On our own, none of them seem to make much of a difference.

But the Holy Spirit is able to take all of them
and speak glorious new things into life.

If you consider the transformation God has made in us and in our church
from where we were 20 years ago,

a tree getting up and replanting itself in the ocean
looks like nothing, looks like a party trick.

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Today we are starting a new chapter in our common life.

This \$6 million bequest for the outreach of the church has arrived
and is unlike anything we've ever known at Holy Trinity.

We don't know how to be millionaires as a parish.

Joe Foley said every outreach initiative has always been guided
by one question: can we afford it?

Now that answer is always Yes, so how do we decide which ones to do?

Thanks be to God, we don't have to have it all figured out.

Like St. Bart's and St. Peter's and Holy Trinity

when the world was changing and we didn't always know
what the right thing to do was,
our job is to say our prayers, do our best,
and have the faith of a mustard seed that God
can do more than we can ask or imagine.

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We won't know the outcomes of some of the decisions we'll make.

We won't know which initiatives are successful and which aren't.
Some of the things we'll do with this bequest will take years,
decades, generations to unfold.

But our job is to believe that God can do with this gift and our actions...
whatever it is that God wishes to do.

Be bold and courageous in these next few years, Holy Trinity,

because God is good and trustworthy,
and God will transform those we reach out to in love.

Be bold and courageous, Holy Trinity, and one day,
in this life or the next,
we will look back at what we tried to do together,
and we will see the working of the Holy Spirit.

Be bold and courageous, Holy Trinity,
and we will discover ourselves transformed into something
we could never imagine being,
like a tree that learned to get up and walk,
and root itself in the waters of the sea.

Amen.