

# “Mustard Seed Faith” by Marjory Bankson

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## Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Luke 17:5-10 *“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.”*

**Recommitment season** happens at Seekers every year at this time, and it recalls our roots in Church of the Saviour. From 1946, when it started, to 1976, when it was reborn as six small churches, C of S became widely known through Elizabeth O’Connor’s books and Mary Cosby’s presence at various conferences. As a mark of its vision for Christian unity, Church of the Saviour even joined the World Council of Churches in 1948 as the Council was forming after WW II. And that’s one of the reasons why we use the lectionary today – because it links us with church unity by using the same biblical texts that other churches use around the world.

**During the 30 years of its singular existence,** Church of the Saviour became famous for taking seriously the biblical mandate that every person has a call and gifts for ministry.

In her book, *Journey Inward/Journey Outward*, Elizabeth O’Connor described the personal disciplines that we still expect of our members, and she described collective action by

mission groups as the “journey outward.” Most churches functioned with a committee structure, headed by an ordained clergy person, and spiritual guidance was left to the preacher. Even at Church of the Saviour, understanding mission groups as the primary means of spiritual formation did not take root until the early 70s.

**Peter and I were first attracted** to C of S by the writings of Elizabeth O'Connor in [Faith@Work magazine](#) and later, through her books – not easy in the days before Amazon. We had participated in the staff of a coffeehouse in Hanover NH, which was patterned after the Potter's House, so we had some understanding of what a mission group might be, but we were not sure that we were ready for the level of commitment that seemed to be the norm at Church of the Saviour. I would say that we had faith the size of a mustard seed – but it was just enough to get us here.

We were anxious and a bit fearful the first time we came through the doors at 2025 Mass. Avenue, where the church was then located. Peter was still on active duty then, assigned by the Army to the Pentagon, and we knew that people at C of S had been active in the anti-Vietnam War movement, as well as the civil rights movement of the late 60s and early 70s. I was a production potter, starting a new business in a new place, and we were short of time and wary of commitment. But we were warmly welcomed by the Gateway Mission Group and they encouraged us to attend Fall classes in the School of Christian Living.

**Our mustard seed-sized faith was planted in good soil at the School.** We tasted its culture of commitment by getting to know others in class who had been around longer and they didn't seem too saintly after all. By the time Recommitment rolled around on the third Sunday of October, we understood that Seekers Church had just been approved by the Council as a C of S church, and that people who were already members of Church of the Saviour would be able to make their first commitment to Seekers Church. Today, Joan Dodge, Mary Carol Dragoo, Emily Gilbert and Muriel Lipp remain with us as founding members.

On the first Sunday that we came to Seekers, Sonya Dyer and Fred Taylor stood at the altar and blessed the elements for communion – much as we will do today. I cried through the whole service, because I had never seen a woman bless the communion bread! Think of that – only 40 years ago, women could not be ordained in most mainline churches. I didn't even know how hungry I was to see a woman do that.

**Unlike the other C of S churches** which formed around a single mission, Seekers declared its call to be a church that would support ministry in daily life. The original call of Seekers Church (which you have on the back of your bulletin insert) claims that we may be called to ministry at work and at home, in volunteer work and as a citizen. Ministry in daily life became our tagline.

Seekers also claimed **shared leadership** as a core value. At first, Fred preached regularly and Sonya served as the primary liturgist. She believed that liturgy – the whole shape of the service, including prayers, music, scripture, responsive readings and the sermon – would form our spiritual lives as a community. Her prayers addressed God in many different forms, and I felt my spirit begin to soar as we expanded our language beyond God as “Father.”

Seekers did embrace the core values of Church of the Saviour: a journey inward and outward for all members; intentional worship to guide the community, the School and mission group life for ongoing spiritual formation. And yearly recommitment was part of that heritage.

Along with those core values, Seekers followed the lectionary because each year it takes us through the basics of the Christian story and links us to the universal church. Sonya invited others to work with her to write the liturgies, make bulletins and choose the music. Over time, that was formalized as the Celebration Circle Mission Group.

**At first**, the School of Christian Living stayed under the wing of Church of the Saviour. But within two years, the Tuesday night School became the Seekers School of Christian Living, because all of the people in that mission group were Seekers.

The Thursday night School remained an arm of C of S until the Servant Leadership School was formed at the Festival Center in the late 80s. Its' focus was not on preparing people for membership in one of the sister churches, but on changing the understanding of church. In that, the audience for the Servant Leadership School was wider than the five C of S churches along Columbia Road.

**My own commitment to Seekers** became more complex as I became a Steward in 1979, left Stewardship in 1981, and rejoined in 1984, after we returned from Germany. The years away from Seekers were full of turmoil for us. Peter retired from the Army, found a job with Synergy here in DC, and I started taking classes at Virginia Seminary. I wasn't sure whether to leave Seekers and seek ordination in the Episcopal Church, or stay here and look for another kind of call. My hour in the sanctuary prior to recommitment each year was full of questions rather than answers. I let go of my illusions about an ideal community that would fill in the gaps left by my biological family, and I learned to stay with my questions, letting them unfold and grow wings rather than blaming Seekers for what was going on inside of me.

**All of that angst and indecision** seems like another life to me now. Once we recommitted to this community in 1984, belonging to Seekers gave shape and form to our lives. Peter settled into Celebration Circle and the Servant Leadership Team, and I settled into Learners & Teachers, where the mission group helped me identify my call as "outreach teaching." That led to my job at [Faith@Work](#), which was my primary place for "outreach teaching" for the next 20 years.

As my focus shifted to my work in the world, recommitting to Seekers every year seemed as natural as Halloween or Thanksgiving. No real obstacles surfaced when I spent my hour in the sanctuary, praying about my desire to be part of this community – **except** for the anxious years around the purchase of this building and raising money from ourselves for the renovation. Several key people did leave during that time and I might have left without Peter's strong commitment to staying

together as congregation.

In retrospect, I see that congregational crises have actually developed resilience among those who have made a commitment to caring for the whole. When we exercise those muscles, they become stronger and more flexible. We trust those who stay because our commitments have been tested.

**But now Peter and I are at another turning point**, and my faith seems pitifully small again. As some of you know, we have bought an apartment about a block from here in order to be closer to Seekers as we age. It means leaving a house we have lived in for 40 years, along with familiar haunts for haircuts, tooth repair, groceries and the other gribble of daily life. In spite of moving frequently with Peter's Army career, change is hard for me. I find myself asking questions like these: "Can I trust them to care? Who might be there when I need help? Will I be asking too much? What happens when I don't have the energy to give as well as receive? "

**On silent retreat** this past weekend, Marcia Sprague led us in XiGong movement and guided meditations designed **to enlarge the space for God**. As we moved through the weekend, I felt expansive and relaxed. By Saturday night, my dreams were literally tumbling out. I awoke on Sunday morning with a sense of excitement, but when I sat quietly with my journal, what came was an image of starting across a bridge with no handrail.

If you've been to Dayspring recently, you know that they have installed a wonderful handrail along the path between the sleeping quarters and the Lodge. But in my dream, I was starting up a steep curved arch with no handrail to steady me with my pilgrim pack on my back. I felt kind of homeless and afraid, wondering if we will be asking too much of Seekers after we move. We want to trust that the relationships that we have invested in will hold steady. Even though we do not intend to be a burden in the future, I am afraid that we will be. My ego wants assurance. My faith is only big enough to take the first step of confessing my fears.

The good news of the Gospel this week is that we can take

Jesus at his word: **faith the size of a tiny mustard seed is enough**. I think the comment about moving a mulberry tree to another location is pure exaggeration. And in the mysterious parable which follows the mustard seed reference, I think Jesus is saying "Don't expect a big reward for doing what you're supposed to do."

Listen to the text from that perspective:

*The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"* [That's the framework for his response. We're talking here about spiritual formation.]

*The Lord replied, "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.* [Here's the reassurance for those with a tiny amount of faith: it will be more than enough. Luke says, "Don't worry. Just take the next step." Then he tells an odd story.]

*Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink;'"* Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? [Here the apostles seem to be equated with demanding slave-holders, but Luke describes the situation like God's banquet table, where a slave might be invited to sit down at the table. Somehow this scenario is a set-up for increasing their faith, so we need to listen carefully for the punchline.]

*So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"* Worthless slaves? Such melodrama! What is Luke's message here?

After wrestling with this text for a couple of weeks, I suspect the point is that we can't earn our way into God's grace. We have already been freed. We are already beloved. Therefore, even a small bit of faith is enough to start with. We are each invited to step forward, to say "yes" to the joy of being part of this body of Christ – to have a role in

shaping it day by day, year by year.

And we each have been given work to do, and our job is just to do it with a whole heart. It may not change the world. It may not even bring someone else to Jesus. As Peter said last week in his sermon, attending to call and continuing to let God shape us toward loving one another as Jesus loved his disciples is the work that is ours to do. The reward is the work itself, and the sense of integrity that it brings.

As we gather around the table on this World Communion Sunday, let us remember that Christians all over the world are celebrating the same invitation. We are slaves to a different kind of Master – one who says “Come. Sit here at the table with me. Eat this bread. Drink this wine. Remember me at the heart of your ministry in daily life.”

May it be so. Amen.