

## ATOMIC FAITH

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Luke 17:5-10

Two weeks ago, a young Swedish woman named Greta Thunberg spoke before the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York City. The words she delivered before the assembled world leaders were blunt have been described as “stinging.”<sup>1</sup> She started off saying to the adults in the room, “This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”<sup>2</sup> Stinging words, indeed.

Her words become even more amazing when you realize that Greta Thunberg is just 16 years old. She lives in Stockholm, Sweden, with her parents. She explains that she first learned about climate change when she was 8 years old and could not understand why so little was being done about it. She convinced her parents to lower their carbon footprint by becoming vegan and by giving up flying. A year ago, when Greta was 15, she began protesting by standing outside the Swedish parliament building handing out flyers and holding a sign that read ‘School Strike for Climate.’ Her actions inspired students in other communities to engage in similar protest. Rather quickly, Greta became a powerful voice in the global movement to address climate change. She was invited to speak at the United Nations.

I strongly believe that we are indeed in a crisis of climate change. I believe that human actions have had a negative effect on our global environment. Massive deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels are contributing to spiraling global temperatures, rising ocean temperatures, more frequent and intense heat, more destructive hurricanes, more extreme weather events, melting glaciers, and more. Scientists around the world have reached an overwhelming consensus that climate change is real and caused primarily by human activity. According to the National Academy of Science, “The need for urgent action to address climate change is now indisputable.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/23/greta-thunberg-speech-un-2019-address>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nationalacademies.org/includes/G8+5energy-climate09.pdf>

So, if I believe in the veracity of climate change, what am I doing about it? It is embarrassing to admit, but I'm doing very little. I try to limit how much I drive, but not very well. I monitor the energy I consume; it's a lot. I recycle. Sadly, I feel that what I do will have little overall impact. I am not yet willing to live off the grid. I am not willing to become vegan. I like air conditioning. I like the convenience of flying.

But if I do the math, I should be able to make a difference. I am an adult living in the United States. I have multiple educational degrees. I am a professional speaker. I literally have a pulpit; and I have an audience. On paper, I have far more power than 16-year-old Greta Thunberg. But I wasn't invited to speak to the UN, and she was. And why is that? There is a difference between us. Greta has faith. Not Christian faith as we understand it, but faith as defined by the dictionary—"complete trust or confidence in someone or something." Greta's faith is in herself to bring about change. It is not arrogance on her part, but an intensity, a focus, a commitment to do what is right despite the costs. Her faith is based on the cold logic that if we don't act then we will destroy our world as we know it.

Our reading today from the gospel of Luke is part of a larger collection of Jesus' sayings found in chapter 17. Now, we don't believe that Jesus spoke these words back to back as printed in our bibles, but rather that Luke placed them together here under the umbrella of 'things Jesus teaches his disciples and followers.' Our reading consists of two parables—the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the worthless slaves.

In the parable of the mustard seed, the disciples demand that Jesus increase their faith. This is not an un-reasonable demand. If they are going to be Christ followers, they should want and need more faith. It's like an athlete saying to the coach, make me stronger. A stronger athlete is a better athlete. A disciple with more faith is a better disciple.

Jesus responds to their request saying, *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.*

A mustard seed, as we know, is an extremely small seed. It is not the smallest of seeds by any measure. But Jesus' audience would have been familiar with the mustard seed and how it grows into a large, ungainly bush.

The lesson here is that faith, in any amount, is sufficient. It is not about having more faith; it is rather about having faith at all. Even the smallest amount is enough to do incredible things. For example, with faith, you could command a tree—a mulberry tree, maybe an oak tree—to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea, and it would obey you. Jesus is not implying that faith is magic, but that faith is power. I like to think that when telling this parable that Jesus was simply

pointing at whatever was nearby. “With faith, you can order that tree there to jump into that lake.” If it were me, I might say, “With faith, you could turn this pulpit into a porcupine.” Have faith, and the inconceivable becomes possible.

For Greta Thunberg, her faith allows her to speak truth to those in power. If you have faith the size of a small, Swedish girl, you can address the leaders of the world and they will obey you. Comments made by some of the leaders at the UN indicate that after hearing Greta speak, they intend to make changes. Maybe they wanted to make these changes all along and maybe it took the blunt and stinging words of a person with faith to push them. We need to do something. It was reported this week that across the globe, the month of September was the warmest September on record.<sup>4</sup>

As people of faith, do we exercise our faith? Speaking today, Jesus might have put it this way, If you have faith the size of an atom, you can move mountains. An atom, as we know, is terribly small, much smaller than a mustard seed. Atomic faith would be very small. But split that atom and you can move mountains.

Faith is not about quantity; it is about our willingness to be in relationship to God.

The first parable in our reading is the parable of the mustard seed. If we have faith the size of a mustard seed, we can change the world. The second is the parable of the worthless slaves. This parable is problematic for us in that it deals with the relationship between a slave and his master.

In telling this parable, Jesus looks out over the crowd and poses this question, *Who among you would say to your slave who has just finished a day of work in the fields, ‘come and take your place with me at the table for dinner?’* The people in that crowd likely got a chuckle at the notion that any of them owned slaves. Jesus’ people were the poor—those at the lowest end of the economic ladder. There may even have been slaves in the crowd. So, when your slave comes in at the end of the day, do you invite him to take his place at the dinner table, or do you tell him to do his job, to fix dinner for you, and serve you while you eat and drink. Later, when everything is done, then the slave can eat. When the slave has completed his tasks, do you, the master, thank him for his work? Again, Jesus’ listeners would have gotten a chuckle as they imagined ever getting thanked from someone above them for doing their job.

Jesus rounds out the parable saying, *So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, you say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’*

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/10/04/global-warming-september-2019-hottest-record/3865898002/>

Jesus, here, is speaking to his disciples and followers about how, in their lives of faith, in their relationship with God, they assume the attitude of a slave who is only doing his job. They feel overworked and under-appreciated. No one says thank you.

What Jesus is telling his disciples is that they do the same thing. They do only what they are required to do, and no more, and they expect to be thanked for. This parable teaches that the exercise of faith is more than doing the bare minimum.

The disciples follow God's commands, they give when asked, they sacrifice at the temple, but they do so like slaves being ordered by their master. Faith is to be expressed with joy and extravagance. To be a follower of Christ introduces a new way of living.

Last Saturday, many of you gathered here to assemble meals for those who might otherwise go hungry. Essentially, we filled 2000 baggies with rice, soy, and dried veggies. On the one hand, it was repetitious, tedious work. But on the other hand, it was fun. Every one of you approached the task with an attitude of joy. Yes, you sacrificed a Saturday morning, but you were doing so not as slaves but as disciples following Christ's commands. When we can approach the ordinary tasks as opportunities to live out our faith, we can discover the extraordinary depths of God's love for us. And, we discover the seemingly ordinary (but quite extraordinary) people around us.

We all want our lives to be mountaintop experiences. There is nothing wrong with a mountaintop experience, but the reality is that life is mostly the mundane. But even the most mundane act of faith carries extraordinary potential for transforming the world to reflect God's kingdom. I will never address the United Nations, but I can take joy in the simplest task of recycling a glass bottle or a plastic bag.

Today, we celebrate communion. Communion isn't a grand feast (okay, today it is). It is just a bit of bread and a sip of juice. But it is sufficient. When we take communion, we don't complain about the meager portions, we rejoice in how it connects us to God and to one another.

As followers of Christ, we don't need to worry about the size of our faith. We should go about living in obedience to Jesus' commands. As we read later in this gospel, *Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much* (16:10). Let us be faithful in all we do. May every action be done in joy and in discipleship.

Amen.