

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, World Wide Communion Sunday, October 3, 2010, Pentecost 19, dedicated to Scott Patrick Winberry Jr. on his baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!

“The Mustard Seed and St. Simeon”

***Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4;
II Timothy 1:1-14; Luke 17:5-10***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.

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The mustard seed is small in comparison with so many other seeds. Yet it produces a tree which grows to great size and gives the world a wonderful spice. This spicy seed is the source of many stories across the three Abrahamic faiths. In the Qu`ran, Allah states that the scales of justice will be established on the Day of Judgment and no soul will suffer the least injustice. Even the equivalent of a mustard seed will be accounted for because God is the most efficient reckoner (Sura 21, The Prophets). The Talmud in Judaism compares the knowable universe to the size of a mustard seed to demonstrate the world's insignificance and the importance of humility. The Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides wrote that the universe expanded from the moment of creation and when it was the size of a mustard seed.

Jesus spoke of the parable of the mustard seed in Matthew, Mark and Luke. While each parable is small, all

focus on the power of God to do amazing things if we have faith the size of a mustard seed. Faith is also the focus of our readings from Habbakuk and II Timothy. The prophet tells people to write down their faith vision, post it and make it accessible and easy to grasp even for those running through the streets! Similarly, Paul writes to Timothy to rekindle the fire of faith that has been given to him by his mother and grandmother. In other words, faith must come alive for Timothy through prayer, study, conviction - not because he was told to be a certain way by his mom and grandmother.

The faith of an entire church in Egypt has grown out of the mustard seed parables in Matthew and Luke. Allow me to share this story on World Communion Sunday.

Coptic Christians tell the 1,000-year-old story of the mustard seed and St. Simeon. In the late 10th century, Egypt was led by Caliph Al Muizz, an enlightened man who was fond of inviting different religious leaders to debate in his presence with neither anger nor contention.

In one meeting, in which the 62nd Coptic Pope Abram and a Jew named Jacob Ibn Killis were debating, the pope got the upper hand in the exchange. Angered by Abram's brilliance, Ibn Killis quoted the parable of the mustard seed in Mt. 17:20: "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to the mountain, Move from here to there, and it will move, for with God, nothing is impossible."

Then Jacob Ibn Killis demanded Pope Abram prove that his religious faith was right by moving Mokattam Mountain. The caliph agreed, for he liked the challenge to Pope Abram of moving the mountain through the power of faith in God. He also saw an opportunity. He wanted to move Mokattam Mountain, which was spoiling the view from his mountain. He thought if Abram and his Christians couldn't move the mountain, it would prove their religion was wrong and he could exile them from Egypt.

Abram was granted three days to fast and prepare to move the mountain. He brought together monks, priests and elders who prayed continuously for three days. On the third morning, Abram was praying in the Church of the Holy Virgin Mary (in what is now Old Cairo) - more popularly known as the Hanging Church. There he saw a vision of the Virgin Mary. She sent Abram to the marketplace and told him to find a humble holy man, a one-eyed tanner, named Simeon.

Upon finding the diminutive Simeon, he told Abram to gather all his priests and all Christians and go to Mokattam Mountain. The caliph and his soldiers were to be there too. Simeon then told Abram to cry out, "O Lord, have mercy," three times, and each time to make the sign of the cross over the mountain. The patriarch followed the words of Simeon the tanner (who was standing in the crowd as this happened). The mountain began to shake. An earthquake struck Mokattam, lifting and moving the mountain several feet.

After the miracle at Mokattam Mountain, the pope turned left and right looking for Simeon the tanner, but he had disappeared and no one could find him. He was never to be seen again.

Caliph Al Muizz then turned to Abram and said, "O patriarch, I have recognized the correctness of your faith. Your God can move mountains with only the faith of the mustard seed!"

Al-Muizz converted to Christianity and when he did, his view of the mountain was his favorite of all! A baptismal font, large enough for the immersion of a grown man, was built for him in the Church of St. Mercurius. To this day, the font exists and is known as "Maamoudiat Al-Sultan", which means "Baptistry of the Sultan."

Today, in the place where St. Simeon's faith the size of a mustard seed moved the mountain, five Cave Churches have been carved from the cliffs and stones of Mokattam. They

stand as a powerful witness to the humble saint. They are cathedrals carved from the stones of this urban mountain! The largest church is an 8,000-seat amphitheatre that is filled every Thursday night for joyful, celebrative worship with garbage collectors (poor Christians worship Thursday nights or Fridays to match the prayer time and day off of Muslims on Friday).

These amazing churches can be accessed only by driving through the narrow streets of Garbage City where 100,000 zabaleen, or “garbage collectors,” live.

I visited Garbage City and the Cave Churches five weeks ago. It is a city within Cairo piled several stories high in garbage. Of the 13 million tons of garbage created every day in Cairo, most of that garbage ends up in the Garbage City of Mokattam. It is impossible to describe the smell and sight of people living here. The streets of Garbage City are narrow because garbage is everywhere. Contained in bags that stand 8 feet high and 6 feet across, these heavy-duty garbage bags hold everything from food waste to plastics, to paper. The bags are dumped and cleared out in alley ways and homes. One house I looked into had three children sitting in what looked like a living room, sorting through garbage at their feet. The stench was overwhelming.

When the bags are cleared, plastic, metal and paper are recycled while food waste is hauled away and buried. I saw children walking and wading through waste and recyclables. The lack of sanitation is frightening. Imagine living in a dumpster and raising a family there for three or four generations. Multiply that by 75,000 families doing the same thing all around you. This is what it looks like to be the zabaleen of Garbage City.

In the midst of garbage is a mustard seed conspiracy. Here piled in garbage is an alive and hopeful Christian community. There is also APE! APE is the Association for the Protection of the Environment. It is an NGO (Non-Government

Organization) seeking to change the environment of Garbage City for the better. They have established schools and children protection programs, women's collectives, health-care services, gardens and programs for the community. Along with APE, church groups are the building blocks of hope growing out of this dump east of the Citadel and the Islamic center of the city.

Out of the garbage of Cairo, the witness of Christians is nothing short of miraculous. More than 60,000 of the zabaleen are Christians (Christians only make up 15% of Egypt's total population). The Christians are orthodox, Catholic and evangelical. Mother Teresa's Sisters of Charity have a ministry here. Christians have opened Good Shepherd Hospital to care for the children and adults with cancers and a host of diseases growing out of this toxic environment.

Truly the people of the Cave Churches are a resurrection story. Out of the garbage of Cairo, the zabaleen are a true witness to faith and perseverance. Everywhere you go, the cross of Christ can be found on buildings, in homes and most certainly in the cliffs of Mohattam. These Christians love to tell of the little tanner St. Simeon and joyfully remind you of a story we should all know - that our savior, Jesus Christ, was crucified on garbage dump on a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem. A church that witnesses to Christ out of the garbage in these times is truly a church of resurrection faith.

How about us? Do we have faith the size of a mustard seed? Can our hearts and minds be opened and changed by the power of God working on us and in us? Is there a mustard seed conspiracy of faith within our souls that can move mountains in our city and in our time?

The way to find out is to pray. When we pray to God, amazing things happen. The limitless power of God begins to work on us. Don't forget, we are reminded by Paul that this faith must be ours - not just an inheritance from our mothers and grandmothers or someone else. Habbakuk encourages us

to write down the vision we gain from the faith we have - make it clear for others to see and follow. Simeon reminds us to be holy and humble in our walk with God.

And Jesus plants the seeds. God gives the growth. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called to God's table of grace to receive the fruit of seeds sown by others. Here at the table, the seeds of wheat have been harvested as the Bread of Life and remind us of the body of Christ. The seeds of grapes have grown to produce the Cup of Blessing - the wine and grape juice that we receive as the blood of Christ. Come, God's seeds have grown into a eucharist of love. Come, be sustained by a faith that gives us nothing less than life eternal! Amen.

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