



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Sermon preached by Rev. Sharon Gracen

October 3, 2010

The Golden Highway of Faith

Before I moved to California, I had never heard of Fr. Junipero Serra. He was the 18th century Franciscan friar who founded the many of the missions that are found from San Diego all the way up to San Francisco. Today, most of them have been restored and are lovely places of Franciscan beauty and spirituality. The Mission at San Juan Capistrano, where the swallows historically returned each year, was not far from where we lived. There is a lovely story about Fr. Serra and his journeys up and down California. It seems that when the monks came from Spain, they had brought with them mustard seeds and Fr. Junipero scattered them to mark his path the first time he walked north. When he made his return back down to southern California the next spring, he walked back on a ribbon of gold. The wild mustard that grows all over the hills in Orange County is a colorful reminder. This year it was particularly beautiful and long lasting.

While in California, I learned quite a bit about mustard plants and their seeds. They are not only tiny but invasive and prolific; one plant can produce up to a million seeds. When they finish blooming and dry out, they are likely to break off near ground level and act like a tumbleweed, spreading those seeds like wildfire. Jesus' use of the mustard seed to describe faith was probably not just a commentary on relative size. It was also a metaphor for how faith can invade and take over your life.

Now we jumped into the middle of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples in today's Gospel reading from Luke. After last week's parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus gave them a glimpse of what it means to follow him. He told them about the perils of the temptations that will come their way and their consequences. How they would be required to forgive, and forgive, and forgive, as many as seven times in a day. And here's where we come in, the disciples said, "Oy vey!" an equivalent to Luke's "Increase our faith!" The bottom line is that they were worried that they didn't have what it took to be his followers.

Jesus actually had more confidence in their faith than they did. His statement "If you had the faith the size of a mustard seed..." is often heard as Jesus rolling his eyes and lamenting that they don't even have that much faith. What we don't hear in our translations is that he is really saying "the faith that you have, no matter how small can work miracles." Perhaps they already knew that and their, "Increase our faith!" might actually have been closer to "help us understand the faith that we have."

I believe that there are two ways of approaching and understanding faith and they are both necessary. The first is best stated by Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, 1000 years ago, in his motto *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. This was not an attempt by Anselm to replace faith with logic but rather "an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God." (Williams, Thomas (1997). Review of Holopainen (1996) in *History and Philosophy of Logic* 18 (1997): 55-59.) For Anselm, faith is the ultimate quest, a spiritual journey that continually takes us further and deeper.

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This is where we in the Episcopal Church do our best work – we question and continually seek a better understanding. This was brought home to me in my first two years of Seminary at a protestant, ecumenical seminary in Indianapolis. I was part of a very small Episcopal minority among 25 other denominations. Some of my fellow students were from very conservative traditions. As we studied scripture and theology, it was truly difficult for them to be comfortable with an approach that questioned a literal reading and interpretation of the Bible and the basics of Christianity. For me, raised an Episcopalian, the more we dug and reframed and questioned, the more exciting I found my search for understanding. That continues to this day and I have applied it to other parts of my life as well. It's healthy to question and challenge what we think and believe and to cast a discerning eye on the sources of our information, whether it's church doctrine and Biblical interpretation, the news we listen to or even those who advise us on our health and medical needs. A healthy dose of skepticism and knowing how to ask the right questions is a good thing. The prayer after baptism says it all; "Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and persevere, a spirit to know and love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works." That is "faith seeking understanding."

The other aspect of faith is not in the head, it's in the heart. It is our response to the holy and it feels like being home, being comforted. Mostly, it feels like being loved. I think that this is what the disciples were responding to when they asked Jesus to increase their faith. They wanted to know that they were loved unconditionally and how to learn to love in the same way. Jesus told them, you already have that kind of faith but you just don't realize it. So he gave them the tools, prayer and study, worship and service, simplicity and sacrifice. The development of these tools is the work of the church and they are spiritual practices, or disciplines that help us to increase our faith.

The classic volume on these practices is titled *Celebration of Discipline; The Path to Spiritual Growth* by Richard Foster, who is a Quaker. It was written in 1977 and is on its third edition already. Foster is clear about the awesome generosity of God and our role in our own spiritual growth. He likens it to a gardener who is incapable of making a seed sprout and take root. All the gardener can do is to prepare the soil, plant the seeds and water them. Then the God's wonder unfolds – the miraculous work of creation happens and up comes beauty. Foster says, "This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines...they are God's way of getting us into the ground; they put us where (God) can work with us and transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God's means of grace."

This past Wednesday, we tried something at the Healing Service. When we came to the passing of the Peace, I encouraged those who were there to greet one another by saying "I see Christ in you." There was embracing and a little discomfort and several people commented, "Ooo, this is hard for New Englanders!" I said that this is what happens when you call a California priest, but in our Baptismal Covenant, we promise to "seek and serve Christ in all people..." This was a way to prepare the soil and plant the seeds and water them with tears that came from the heart. It was pretty powerful stuff because God used what we did and I know that I saw Christ. I left the Guild Room better than when I went in.



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Our faith may indeed be as small as a mustard seed, but like Father Junipero Serra, planting those seeds will show us the way home on a beautiful golden highway of grace and blessing.