

“Faith the Size of a Mustard Seed”

Luke 17:5-10

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Frog was in his garden.

Toad came walking by.

"What a fine garden you have, Frog," he said.

"Yes," said Frog. "It is nice, but it was hard work."

"I wish I had a garden," said Toad.

"Here are some flower seeds.

Plant them in the ground," said Frog,

"and you will have a garden."

"How soon?" asked Toad.

"Quite soon," said Frog.

Toad ran home.

He planted the flower seeds.

"Now seeds," said Toad, "start growing."

Toad walked up and down a few times.

The seeds did not start to grow.

Toad put his head close to the ground again.

The seeds did not start to grow.

Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted,

"NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!"

Frog came running up the path.

"What is all this noise?" he asked.

"My seeds will not grow," said Toad.

"You are shouting too much," said Frog.

"These seeds are afraid to grow."

"My seeds afraid to grow?" asked Toad.

"Of course," said Frog.

"Leave them alone for a few days.

Let the sun shine on them,

let the rain fall on them.

Soon your seeds will start to grow."

That night Toad looked out his window.

"Drat!" said Toad. "My seeds have not started to grow.

They must be afraid of the dark."

Toad went out to his garden with some candles.

"I will read the seeds a story," said Toad.

"Then they will not be afraid."

Toad read a long story to his seeds.

And the next day Toad read poems to his seeds.

And all the next day Toad played music for his seeds.

Toad looked at the ground.

The seeds still did not start to grow.

"What shall I do?" cried Toad.

"These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!"

Then Toad felt very tired, and he fell asleep.

"Toad, Toad, wake up," said Frog.

"Look at your garden."

Toad looked at his garden.

Little green plants were coming up out of the ground.

"At last," shouted Toad,

"my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow."

"And now you will have a nice garden too," said Frog.

"Yes," said Toad, "but you were right, Frog.

It was very hard work."¹

I have a confession to make (though it is not a very brave confession, and it is only a very small sin). I slept through the birth of my grandson. Sally came to the visitors waiting room where I was slumped. She touched me very softly and said, "Jim, Jim, your grandson is here."

When Rolando and I were downstairs getting some breakfast for Erin and coffee for ourselves before the baby was born, an announcement came over the intercom at St. Joseph's Hospital. We were told by a female voice that this day was the feast day of St.

Francis of Assisi. St. Francis, it was pointed out, is the patron saint for the Wheaton Franciscan Order of nuns which own St. Joseph's Hospital, among other health care facilities. So, I figure, presuming that Marcos would be born on this day as we expected, he would have the patron saint of the hospital on his side. Cool!

Actually, there are a precious few "official" saints of the church that I know anything about. And most of them I learned about later in life for some of their theological insights. But Francis everyone knows something about. He was of rich inheritance and of wealthy station in life, and forsook it all to become a mendicant—a priest who supported his ministry by begging on the streets. He talked to animals and called them his brothers and sisters; even the sun, moon and stars were his brothers and sisters. He founded a reform movement in the church and advocated for peace.

His peace prayer is well known. In fact, it was sung by Sinead O'Connor two weeks ago at a fund raiser for the victims of the violence of September 11. "Make us, Lord, apostles of your peace. Where there is hatred let me sow love..."

I could only remember pieces of that prayer and tried to recite it in the hospital room, but to no avail. Friday morning I was in the shower trying to remember the prayer. Still no luck. Nothing more than a few phrases came to mind. When I got out of the shower and while I was dressing, I turned on the TV. Caroline Kennedy was on the Rosie O'Donnell show, and just as the TV came into focus I heard her reading from a new book that she had put together of poetry that her mother loved. And as the TV's sound came on I heard her reading the prayer of St. Francis. For those who have no religious beliefs, that would be called a coincidence. For me, coincidences of that sort are God's way of remaining anonymous. This was a blessing.

One that I actually slept through, like Toad.

It is hard work to do the work of the Church, the work that our Lord calls us to do. Ordained ministers are especially aware of this. We are never quite sure how our work will be received. And the things we worked hardest on in our lives and ministry actually are the places where the plants would have grown quite well all by themselves. It was enough to plant the seeds and pray for the growth.

But each of us is aware of this in a variety of ways. In our desire to do good, to do the right thing, we all struggle with what will be the most effective way of approaching a problem and how will one know if one's work or contribution has been successful. There are many such crisis moments in all our lives when we don't know what to say or do. We pray that God will give us the courage to do or say the right thing, but we never really know how effective our contribution is.

These two parables, of the seed that grows on its own and the mustard seed, are significant whenever and wherever we Christians take ourselves and our efforts too seriously, seeking by our own plans and programs to "bring in the kingdom of God." Sometimes it's better to sleep and wait for God to do what God will do.

Napoleon held Pope Pius VII captive for five years because of a "disagreement" over the relationship of the French government and the church. "I will destroy that church of yours," Napoleon reportedly said. The wise old Pius the VII who was, like Francis, of nobility before becoming a Benedictine monk, replied, "I doubt it. We priests have been trying to do it for eighteen centuries and have not succeeded."

"With all our follies we Christians, who are the church, have tried our best to humiliate it, betray its character, bring it low in the world's eyes. We have not succeeded because Jesus is the church's Lord and the Holy Spirit is its inner principle of life. Like the kingdom it leads to, the church is indestructible. On all the continents and remotest islands it 'puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nest in its shade'."

More important than warning in these parables, however, is encouragement for the Church, that even when it thinks it is not doing what it ought, the work of our God in our midst continues to do what it might. Our efforts feel often to be in vain, but in the end we shall marvel, as a sower at harvest. Growth and change and new life occur while we sleep, and we know not how.

"The Apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith.' And Jesus said, 'If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, it will be enough.' " And it is always enough.

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1. From Frog and Toad Together by Arnold Lobel, "The Garden" Harper & Row, 1971, pp. 18-29.