

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC **Oct. 6, 2109**
27th Sunday of Year C **Luke 17:5-10**

Often there can be a tendency for people to compare themselves to others. There is always someone who is more successful, more attractive, more popular, more whatever. Of course, it is a self-defeating exercise because nobody can have it all. This can even extend to the area of religion. We may look around at family members and friends and wish that we had the degree of faith that they seem to possess. Yet, in today's Gospel we hear Jesus say we need only the degree or amount of faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, and that is enough to uproot a mulberry tree and have it planted in the sea. Jesus is contrasting something very tiny--the mustard seed--with something much larger, much stronger--a mulberry tree. What is significant about the mulberry tree is its extensive root system. The mulberry tree stands out from other kinds of trees in that its roots are much more entrenched in the ground--it appears to be immovable. Jesus is implying that faith as tiny, as insignificant, as the size of a mustard seed can move seemingly tremendous obstacles.

Let me give an example of that from my own experience where I saw that lesson proved true. Before I arrived here, I was the pastor of St. Peter's Church in lower Manhattan. I was also responsible for St. Joseph's Chapel in Battery Park City, where the World Financial Center is also located. St. Joseph's Chapel was a small, store-front church, located in an apartment complex; not some impressive structure, but hidden among the skyscrapers.

One day a woman who worked in the cafeteria of one of the major financial institutions located in the area, which will remain nameless, came and told me that she and some of her co-workers were trying to organize a union in that particular cafeteria. They were only asking for the same pay scale and benefits that all the other cafeteria workers in the other companies processed. The right to form a union is something that Pope Leo XXIII defended in his encyclical, Rerum Novarum, back in 1891--nothing radical or revolutionary here.

What they were asking of me was to allow them to hold a prayer service in St. Joseph's Chapel, where they could gather and pray for the success of their effort. They wanted to invite others who were in sympathy with their struggle to come pray with them. They said they would put up posters throughout Battery Park City announcing the time and date of the prayer service. The cafeteria workers had been trying for many years to achieve their goal. Each time they made their request, the spokespeople of this particular financial

institution came back with the same response, “We can't do anything because that food concession is contracted out to another company, and we have no control over how they run their operation.” But this was a cop-out, because if they really wanted to do something, they certainly could.

I agreed to let them have the prayer service in the chapel. All I would have to do was turn on the lights and say a little prayer—not very much at all. I really had very little faith that, after so many years of struggle, they would now be able to achieve their goal. But this prayer service certainly was the least I could do. In short, I had faith the size of a mustard seed that much could be accomplished. As the date for the service approached, I received word from one of the organizers that unexpectedly the financial institution had agreed to all their requests. Now what was supposed to be a prayer service asking for God's help in their struggle became a service of thanksgiving. The one request that the company asked of these cafeteria workers was that they take down all the signs throughout Battery Park City announcing the prayer service in St. Joseph's Chapel. Letting the cafeteria workers have this simple prayer service was the catalyst that moved this huge financial organization to change their position, when over so many years had appeared entrenched in their refusal to grant these workers their basic union rights.

I don't want to give the impression that this is about me, because it is the very opposite. It is that God can work through any one of us, if we give God the room to work in our lives, if we provide God with even the smallest of spaces, the space the size of a mustard seed. If in the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, if we “say Yes to God.” We should never underestimate what God can accomplish through any of us, if we are open to the possibility that yes, something good can be accomplished here and now. We should never become hostages to defeatism or pessimism, because in the doing of any good deed we are never alone—God is always working with us, and through us, and in us.

The response to the psalm that we say a few minutes ago had the words, “If today you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.” Those words ask us not to close ourselves to that possibility that God can be accomplishing His will through us. Too often we say “No” to God and we say “Yes” to cynicism, to laziness, to indifference. In so many words we say nothing good can be accomplished here, and so nothing good is accomplished—a self-fulfilling prophecy. Today's Gospel asks us simply to be open, that when there is even the smallest chance that something good can result from even the most minimal of efforts, don't stand back. Make that small effort because we never know what God has in store. On Friday we celebrated the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. St Francis' prayer was “Lord let me be an instrument of your peace, a channel

of your grace.” Let us prayer that we can be just that, that we can live that prayer within our families, in our neighborhood, where we work—that we always have faith, even if it be the smallest degree of faith, in what God can do through anyone of us.