

Year C, Proper 22
 Luke 17:5-10
 St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
 Oct. 7, 2007, 8:00 a.m. liturgy
 The Rev. John Spicer

Fearless Stewardship

(The sermon began with a testimony from parishioners David and Jessica Cunningham about their stewardship of God's gifts to them, particularly the gift of musical talent. David teaches music in an elementary school and plays trumpet, and Jessica is a graduate student in flute at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music. Both have shared their gifts with St. Andrew's during liturgies over the past year.)

Over the past several months, we've been blessed a number of times as Jessica and David have shared their musical gifts with us. In other parishes where I've been, the quality of musicianship we've heard from them, and several others here, would have been reserved for Easter Sunday or Christmas Eve. But because of their willingness to share what God has given them, we've been allowed to glimpse God's glory just a little more clearly.

Now, despite their giftedness, there was no preordained guarantee that David and Jessica would be people who could come into a new church, step out in front, and lead others to God through their music. My guess is that, at some point in their lives – maybe at several points in their lives – it would have been easy for David and Jessica to say, “Never mind; I'm not good enough. Sure,” they might have thought, “I have some talent with this flute or this trumpet or this voice. But I don't have what it takes to stand up in front of a crowd and really put this gift to use.” It would have been easy for them, as it is for all the rest of us, to listen to the voice of fear – the voice that seeks to convince us that what we have *isn't* enough. Thank God they *didn't* listen to that voice of fear. If they had, think of how much poorer this congregation would be.

And, of course, the same is true about each one of us here who's willing to use God's gifts to us – gifts that allow people in this very room to create beautiful banners, and teach the Adult Forum, and sing in the choir, and run the gift shop, and visit people who are homebound, and do a hundred other things that make our life together holy.

And yet, we need to ask: How many gifts still lie dormant here? How many blessings and talents do we *not* share because we fear what might happen if we do? It may be that the person next to you is a poet or a teacher or a singer or a problem-solver or a leader or a potentially generous giver – but fear keeps him or her from living it out.

We aren't always very good at assessing the gifts we bear. Most of us, left to our own devices, will look at what God has given us and think, “That can't be enough. I don't have the talent or the time or the money to make a difference.” But that's fear talking.

We certainly aren't alone in that fear. We heard it just a few minutes ago from the disciples in the Gospel reading. Hearing this reading is like walking into the middle of a conversation; and as we enter the room, we hear the disciples saying to Jesus, “Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5) It's their response to Jesus' instruction, a few verses before, that they must forgive those who've hurt them, even if the same person sins against them seven times a day. Faced with such a demanding standard, they expect Jesus to turn up the spiritual juice a little. “Come on, Lord. If you want us to go that far out on a limb, you owe us an extra dose of faith.”

But then we hear Jesus say to them, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, then you could say to [a] tree, ‘be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (Luke 17:6). Now, you might wonder exactly what Jesus is getting at here. It sounds like he’s giving his followers trouble, accusing them of having no faith at all. But that’s not what the text in Greek actually means. It’s closer to the original to translate this line as “If you *have* faith the size of a mustard seed,” then you can do amazing things.^{1,2} He’s *not* telling them that their faith is too weak – just the opposite. He’s saying that even the little bit of faith they do have is enough to make what seems impossible become the stuff of everyday life.

Like the disciples, we assume that our faith isn’t enough – that if God would just give us some more, then we’d overcome our fear of claiming the abundance that blossoms from every twist and turn of the Good News. But Jesus says to the disciples, and to us, “Stop asking for more.” The problem *isn’t* that you don’t have enough faith, he says; the problem is that you don’t see the power and potential of the faith you *do* have. Even that small seed is powerful enough to let you claim God’s blessing, and share that blessing, and transform the world in the process.

Over the next four Sundays, as we focus on stewardship, we’ll hear more stories from St. Andrew’s people – stories about how they tend and manage the life that God has given them to steward. But the point isn’t that people like the Cunninghams are spiritual superheroes whom we trot out in order to make you feel guilty for not measuring up to their model. The point is simply that they have allowed the mustard seed of their faith to take root in them and push itself through the surface to bask and grow in the light of God’s blessing.

In whatever form it takes – in time or talent or treasure – stewardship is fundamentally the choice not to live in fear. It’s the choice to embrace and nurture what God has given us, and then joyfully use it to the glory of God and the well-being of God’s people. It’s not about keeping accounts, and it’s not about making payments. It’s not about earning God’s love or about buying a membership in a social club. Stewardship is the practice of saying “yes” to God’s desire to work with us, and through us, to embody the reality of God’s reign here on earth. Stewardship is intentionally turning away from fear, away from a sense of scarcity, away from the messages of the world that tell us to hold on to what we have because we might lose ourselves if we give any part away. Whether it takes the form of writing a check or playing a flute or caring for others, stewardship is acknowledging the gifts that God has given us and using them with a courageous faith that says, “What God has given me is holy” – and, therefore, isn’t mine at all.

So do not be afraid; instead, trumpet forth your blessedness for all to hear. In giving ourselves away, we have nothing to lose – and the kingdom of heaven to gain.

1. Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Part of the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, 200.

2. Douglas, J.D., ed. *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1990, 278.