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How much do you need?  
Martin Grove United Church  
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Based on Lamentations 1:1-6 and Luke 17:5-10

Does anyone here like the Harry Potter series? I will always be grateful that my children grew up and were at just the right age and stage to really appreciate that whole series of books and movies. I like some of the action. I like some of the depictions of good and evil. I like the idea that children and youth can have such strong moral convictions, and the courage to act on them.

But there is one thing about the Harry Potter movies that has always bothered me. As you likely know, the movies are made up of two kinds of people. There are the people who can use magic, and there are the “muggles” - which is the name given to those who do not practice magic. And what bothers me is the way that the magicians in the movies refuse to interact with the muggles. The muggles live in a town that is a lot like London, and the magicians live in various places, including the famous school for magic, Hogwart's. But even in cases where the magicians and the muggles end up in the same places, the magicians are forbidden -by law - to practice magic around muggles.

And that bothers me. Not because it is an example of class-ism, so much as because ... well ... the muggles are like us - ordinary people living ordinary lives. In other words, people who could probably use a hand now and again. If they were allowed to, I assume that the magicians could cure the common cold, or stop traffic accidents. Presumably the magicians could hang around hospitals and save lives. But instead, the magicians never use their magic to help the muggles.

In fact, the magicians rarely even use magic to help themselves! Often, the magic we see is used in completely irrelevant situations. For example, classmates will do embarrassing things to each other - like turning each other's heads into animal heads. Now in a movie that's funny of course. But in reality, I wonder what the point of magic is if it is never applied to solve real-world problems.

And I have the same reaction to our text from today. Jesus says that if we had

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faith as large as a tiny seed, that we could tell a Mulberry tree to move into the sea. Just like in Harry Potter movies, that might be funny - at least if you picture a tree picking up its bark like a skirt and running into the sea on it's roots which are acting like legs.

And yet I'm still left wondering - what would be the point? Other than being an example of something miraculous - what difference would it make? How does moving a tree around apply to real-world problems? Is Jesus just messing with our heads here?

Or is moving a Mulberry tree just an example - a ridiculous example perhaps - of something that is essentially impossible, to make the point that true faith can do great things, including what we would consider as "miracles". Many of my biblical reference books say just that - that the idea of moving a tree is just a preposterous example, and that the essential point is that true faith can do great things.

I recently purchased a new Bible. Well, not new, because the Bible is old, but a new copy called "The Orthodox Bible". I bought it for 2 reasons. For one thing, the Old Testament text in that Bible is taken from the Septuagint, which is a Greek translation of an earlier Hebrew text. Jesus used the Septuagint himself, although he read the Septuagint translated into Aramaic. The second reason I thought I needed *one more* Bible is because the New Testament text contains references and footnotes from the "early church fathers". And who are these early church fathers? Collectively, these were the leaders who helped shape Christianity into a mature religion in the first few hundred years after Jesus. There are many of course, but you might recognize names like Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius.

I particularly enjoy reading from the early church fathers because they offer insights into the meaning of the church and of Scripture in the opening years of the Christian Church. Their views are much more contemporary with the time of Jesus, and were written before the Crusades, the Reformation, and other events which have shaped our lives and our understanding of Scripture. Sometimes of course, the early church fathers seems out of place by our current standards. But interestingly, the early church fathers had something to say about Mulberry trees.

According to the writings of these early church Fathers, the idea of Mulberry tree moving into the sea is *not* just a meaningless example of an impossible task that can be

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accomplished through faith. The Fathers make the claim that the Mulberry tree was symbolic of the devil's work, because silkworms fed on Mulberry leaves, and worms are an image of hell. In Mark 9 for example, hell is referred to as that place “where your worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched”. And why is the tree instructed to move into the sea? Because the sea is the symbol of destruction, of chaos, of death. In Revelations chapter 20 the devil is cast into the sea. In the book exodus, God kills the Egyptians by running them into the sea.

In short then, according to the early church Fathers, the image of a Mulberry tree moving into the sea is really an allusion to the destruction of the devil. Moving the tree into the water is not a random, meaningless example of something that is impossible: it is symbolic of our common struggle to eliminate evil. It is symbolic of transforming evil.

And if that interpretation is right, then Jesus is saying that even a small amount of faith is enough to transform evil. To change what is bad to what is good. Does that sound realistic to you? Think about a personal situation that is important to you. A recent death in the family, a broken relationship, a breakdown of trust. And think of a time when one small gesture made a huge difference. A warm smile. A wink. A sign of solidarity. When have you seen a small action make a big difference?

*[example of when something very small made a big difference]*

At the beginning of our gospel reading, the disciples ask Jesus to give them more faith. And Jesus basically responds by saying - you have enough. The disciples already had enough. How often do we fall into the same trap as the disciples? How often do we think we need more of something - even faith.

In this congregation, how often have we said that we need more members, or a larger choir, or a better preacher? How often have we blamed the demographics of our community for our current situation? As in our reading from Lamentations, how often do we just sit around and complain? How impressed would we be if Jesus came here today and said - we already have enough ...

And of course, we do need more of some things. While it is true that a church

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does not need a building, if *we* want a building, we need money to maintain it. While it is true that a church does not need paid staff, if *we* want paid staff, we need money for that.

The challenge from Jesus is whether we think we need more faith? Is faith really something that is quantitative? Does it make sense to talk about “more faith”? And if faith is quantitative, how much do we need? Is 50% OK, or do we need 60%? And how would we even know?

A couple of years ago, my family all took a first aid course together. One thing I found interesting was that there were only 3 adults in the class. The rest of the students were teenagers who needed the first aid course because it is one of the prerequisites for becoming a life guard. And I found it interesting to take the course and write the test with these teenagers, because some of them were really focused on the marks. During the written test, I thought we might have the chance to practice treating people for shock because some of them took the test so seriously I thought they were going to faint.

For me, I couldn't have cared less about the test or the marks. [OK – I was interested in scoring better than my children did!] But in terms of first aid, the real test will be what I remember sometime in the future when a medical crisis occurs. This real test will not be about what I know. The real test will be about how I respond.

I believe that faith is like that too. Although there are many things we can learn about faith, faith is not primarily about knowing things. Faith is about acting when the occasion happens. For example, faith is not about knowing that there are 5 kinds of love, faith is about actually loving the people who cross our paths, people in need, people with their own gifts to offer.

Faith is not about knowing things. Faith is not about being perfect. Faith is not something you get a mark for. Faith is about action and engagement in our broken and sometimes weary world. We have enough faith. We have enough of what we need to bring the kingdom of God alive. Here. Now. Do we really need more than that?

Perhaps all that we need is the courage to act as if we had enough faith. We already have enough. Thanks be to God.

*Amen.*