Finding Our Way Home

Writer Anne Lamott recounts that in a sermon, her minister told about how, at the age of seven, her best friend got lost one day. Frightened, the little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived but she couldn't find a single landmark. Finally, a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car and they drove around until she finally saw her church. Pointing it out to the policeman the little girl told him firmly, “You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.” (Traveling Mercies, p. 55)

In today’s Gospel, the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith — and one of the ways that occurs is in community, that is, the Church. I think that, for a lot of us, the Church helps us find our way home: home to the God who created us in his image, called us to new life in his Son, and sends us forth to be the Body of Christ to each other and the world. Being a Christian involves having a faith that is formed and shaped in community, as we grow into the people — into the Church — that God calls us to be.

But institutions generally — and the Church in particular — often get a bad name. I grew up during one of those times when people talked a lot about “finding God in a sunrise;” in other words, who needs the Church when you have a sunrise? We do. We all do. Watching a sunrise is great and yes, God’s presence can be sensed in it. But it requires nothing of us. It doesn’t call upon us to deepen our faith or share it with others. It doesn’t call us to even think about the needs of others, much less respond to them.

Christ knew that we needed each other for our faith to grow and thrive; even he needed others in his ministry. It’s interesting that before Jesus began his ministry, he called together a group of disciples because he knew that we all need others to help us do the work God has given us to do and be the people God has called us to be.
And today’s Gospel is a reminder of that. We can easily read today’s Gospel as being about “me” as an individual, and “my” faith. If I just have “faith the size of a mustard seed…” With that understanding, today’s passage has been misused and abused in all kinds of ways. If I just had enough faith — faith the size of mustard seed — I would be healed, or my marriage would hold together or my sister wouldn’t be on drugs, or I’d do better in school or my job wouldn’t be eliminated. But today’s Gospel isn’t about “me” and “my faith”; it’s about all of us and what we can do together.

Because — although it’s not apparent in the English translation — when Jesus says, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea’ and it would obey you,” the word “you”, in the original Greek, is plural. Jesus isn’t saying this to each disciple as an individual; he’s saying it to them as a group, a community.

Episcopal priest Michael S. White says something in one of his sermons that I completely understand. He points out that, for Southerners, it’s hard to grasp the fact that the word “you” can be plural. “You” is singular and “ya’ll” is plural or, minimally, “you all” is plural.

But in today’s Gospel, “you” is plural so Fr. White clarifies what Jesus is saying in this passage: “If y’all had faith the size of a mustard seed, y’all could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea’ and it would obey y’all.” (Alling and Schlafer, ed., Preaching as Prophetic Calling, pp. 81-82) Christ gave us the Church for a reason — because together we can do things we could never do alone; together we find both the strength and the support to continue and increase in our faith.

Today’s teaching of Jesus says that we really do need each other for both faith and action.

Can I, as an individual alone, in my deepest moments of despair, believe in resurrection and new
life? Maybe not, but the faith of you all — not to mention the faith of countless Christians down through the centuries — can carry me through until I’m able to believe it once again.

Can you, as an individual alone, convince yourself that you’re forgiven for a particular sin that constantly weighs on you? Maybe not right now, but because of our faith, all of us here believe you’re forgiven and that can carry you through until you can believe it yourself. How many people can one person alone reach with the good news of Christ? Not nearly as many as we can reach together.

Founded by Christ, the Church gathers week after week to sing together, to pray with and for one another. The Church gathers week after week to be reminded and shaped by the revelation of what God in Christ has done for us, a revelation that inspires us, heals us, comforts us, challenges us; a revelation that calls us to be Christ to one another and to be his Body in world. And it is together that we find the support and the strength to keep believing that, no matter how difficult our lives can become.

Elaine Pagels is a scholar in Early Christianity but, at one point in her life, she had pretty much given up on the Church as an institution. In her book, *Beyond Belief*, she tells the story about the way she returned to the Church. After days of hospital tests, she and her husband were told that their 2 1/2 year old son, Mark, had a terminal lung disease. There was nothing more that could be done so, as Pagels writes, “we…gathered Mark’s blanket, clothes and Peter Rabbit, and carried [Mark] home,”

Two days later, on a bright, cold Sunday morning in New York City, Pagels interrupted her daily run by stopping in the vestibule of an Episcopal Church to get warm. She says, “Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress — the soaring harmonies of the choir, the priest — a woman in bright gold and white vestments — proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice.”

“As I stood and watched, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death. Standing in the back of that church, I recognized uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. Here was a place to weep without imposing tears upon a child; and here was a heterogenous
community that had gathered to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine. (Cited by John M. Buchanan in a sermon on this passage, September 28, 2003, 4th Presbyterian Church, Chicago; found in Pagles' book on pp. 3-4).

Through the gift of the Church, our faith is increased and we can find our way home to God because it is here that we — with all our sins, faults and shortcomings — become a community of those who can sing when others of us can't find a voice; who can celebrate when others of us have lost sight of joy; who can pray when others of us lack words; who can believe when others of us have lost our faith; who can face death when others of us aren't sure we can face another day. In short, our faith is increased as we help one another celebrate the joys of our lives as well as face those things we cannot control or imagine.

I have heard it rightly said: “I don’t need faith that will move mountains; dynamite and bulldozers can do that. What I need is faith that will move me.” Together, here in this place, we grow in a faith that will move us. Jesus wanted us to have the Church, to have one another, because he knew life is hard to live alone and faith is difficult to hang onto alone. Here, we come together to worship; here we and others can find companions on this earthly pilgrimage: people to talk to and argue with, people to love and care for, people who will keep on believing when we can't, and help us up when we fall; people whose faith inspires us to “go out and do the work God has given all of us to do” In other words, like the little girl in the opening story, it is from the Church that we find our way home — as people of God.

There is so much the community of Church does for us, not least of which is the gift of increased faith for, as Jesus reminded us in today's Gospel, “If y'all have faith the size of a mustard seed, y'all could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea’ — and it would obey y'all.” (op. cit.)

Mother Liza Spangler, Assisting Priest
Church of the Holy Spirit, Orleans, MA