

THE HERCULEAN EFFORT

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The Lord replied, "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." (Luke 17:6)

One of my favorite high school classes was ninth-grade English, especially the long unit on Greek mythology. The stories about Hercules always caught my attention. Hercules never disappointed. He was a son of Zeus, which isn't saying much, since Zeus had the wanderlust. In fact, Hercules was the result of an illicit fling between Zeus and a mortal woman. Zeus' wife, Hera, wasn't pleased at all, and thus took an instant and permanent dislike to Hercules, her husband's illegitimate son. She vowed to make his life as difficult as possible. Nevertheless, Hercules thrived. He became the strongest mortal on earth, with brains to match his brawn.

At one point Hera cast a spell on Hercules that drove him temporarily insane. Out of his mind and in a rage he killed his wife and children. When he finally returned to his senses he was so filled with remorse that he asked the famous Oracle at Delphi how he could atone for his sins. The answer became known as the Twelve Labors of Hercules. He would travel far and wide performing great, heroic good deeds that many thought were impossible. Most of the labors involved capturing or killing various monsters that terrorized populations. But the one labor that I remember the best was the challenge to clean the Augean Stables in one day. The Augean Stables housed three-thousand head of cattle, and hadn't been cleaned in thirty years. They were beyond hope. Hercules was in deep doo-doo. But this time he used brains as well as brawn. He dug channels and rerouted two rivers to flow through the stables and flushed them clean. Once again Hercules triumphed. With his strength and smarts he could do anything.

The first time I read how Hercules accomplished the Twelve Labors, the story inspired me. It told me that no dirty, rotten mess could forever elude a human solution. With brain power and even brute force, the human potential to overcome any obstacle is unlimited. The story of Hercules suggests that we can do anything. What is more, even Jesus seemed to strike a similar optimistic note in today's Gospel reading from Luke. Jesus had been speaking to his disciples about all the difficulties they would encounter as his followers: temptations to sin, the need to be exemplary role models, and the call for unlimited forgiveness. It was at this point that they cried with exasperation, "Increase our faith!" But Jesus bid them not to worry. *"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 writer of Matthew's Gospel (17:20) records Jesus to have said much the same thing. With the same small amount of faith it would be possible to command a mountain to move from here to there and it would obey you. In other words, if you have a little faith, you can do anything.

Really? I can do anything? Do tell me what type of faith is necessary, because I'd like more of it myself, please, and thank you very much. Many people will interpret the type of faith Jesus is talking about here as the same thing as belief. What you need is stronger belief in the power of God in order to move mountains and plant trees in the middle of the sea. Believe in God and anything is possible. If the tree just stares at you when you command it to move, it's because you didn't believe it was going to move in the first place. You doubted. You lacked confidence. You lacked the necessary amount of faith. Increase our faith!

Others will say that belief is one thing, but what Jesus really meant by faith is the willingness and readiness to act on what you believe. If you believe God wants the tree moved and it doesn't obey you, then dig it up and move it. If the door won't open, turn the knob. If the sickness won't depart, see a doctor. God works primarily through people, by merging his Spirit with our spirits. So faith is taking seriously the inspiration of God and ourselves as agents of God. It is to apply a Herculean effort towards making things on earth more like what we imagine them to be in heaven. But trees planted in the middle of the sea? It sounds preposterous, doesn't it? Why would anyone even want to do such a thing?

I remember in the late 1980s when I was a student at General Seminary in Chelsea. I was an avid runner in those days, and the only place nearby to go for a good long stretch without interruption was along the Hudson River. Back then the waterfront was a horrible, abandoned mess full of empty warehouses, broken glass, hypodermic needles, and rotting piers. But today? Today it is a beautiful stretch of luxurious green. Many of the piers jutting out into the river are now parks with open lawns and mature trees. What an amazing transformation over the past 35 years. I never would have thought it possible on my runs in seminary days. It's an accomplishment that should make New Yorkers justifiably proud. Did faith and the power of God have anything to do with it? Some would say yes and some would say no. But the fact is, we now have fully-grown trees planted in the middle of the sea – or the river, as the case may be. Perhaps we really can do anything we set our minds to doing.

Or perhaps not. What I am concerned about are the mountains we cannot move, and the trees we cannot adapt to any new location. We all have in our lives Augean Stables with deep doo-doo that we cannot clean, no matter how hard we might try. What I mean is this: the animosity between you and a family member or coworker you aren't able to heal; the illness that isn't going away; the job you haven't been able to land; the marriage you weren't able to save; the soul mate you haven't been able to find; the dreams you cannot fulfill; the sins for which you cannot atone; the angst you feel over the years that are slipping away. These are the intractable dilemmas of life that defy all our Herculean efforts to solve them. Thus, many people struggle with their sense of worth. It's not so much that they feel like sinners in the hands of an angry God. Rather, they feel like failures who have not found the simple happiness that everyone else seems to be enjoying.

Is the answer then to double your effort? Does increased effort equal increased faith? In today's reading from Luke, Jesus followed up his words on faith with a parable. He asked his listeners to envision a small farm typical of their day. The household staff would consist of one servant whose duties included, among other things, plowing the fields and tending the sheep. The servant works exceptionally hard, and what he hopes for as a reward at the end of the day is a place at the master's table. With such a goal in mind the servant exerts great effort in the fields to prove his worth. Perhaps he will hear the master say, *"Come here at once and take your place at the table."* Sadly, the master says nothing like it. Instead, the servant hears, *"Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later, you may eat and drink."* Even worse, Jesus comments that the proper response from the servant and from you and me under such circumstances is only this: *"We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!"* Thanks, a lot, Jesus. I'll keep that in mind the next time I am struggling with my self-esteem.

I don't think Luke 17:10 is anyone's favorite Scripture passage. It sounds especially cruel. But is it? Actually, I think that in a backhanded sort of way, the parable is especially kind, not cruel. What it does is to expose a lie. It exposes the lie that any Herculean effort will make us worthy to stand before God. Even Greek mythology at times hints at such theological truth. In fact, the Twelve Labors of Hercules were a cruel joke the whole time. Spiteful Hera was pulling the strings. She had the Oracle of Delphi in her back pocket, and designed the various labors to

kill, or at least humiliate Hercules, not enable him to atone for his sins. The whole thing was cruel, just as it would be cruel to encourage the servant in the parable to keep on trying; don't stop believing; "one of these days you're going to earn a place at the master's table. One of these days you're going to hear the master say, '*Come here at once and take your place at the table.*'" It's not going to happen.

Is that where it ends for the servant, then: forever waiting on the table but never sitting down to eat? It may be where it ends in the kingdoms of this world, but it is not where it ends in the kingdom of God. In today's reading from 2nd Timothy (1:1-14), we've heard St. Paul speak of another way – the only way – to be seated at the master's table. It is the way of grace. Paul invites us to rely not on our own strength, Herculean though it may be, but *on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.* He writes on: *This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

Imagine, God's gracious purpose always has been to seat us at his table. The appearing of Jesus in the world represents God's pulling out a chair and offering each one of us a place. Understand the scope of this. Each one of us here today gathers at God's table to enjoy a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. We're here not because we deserve to be, but because God's gracious invitation placed us here. We are servants at the master's table. We are like trees planted in the sea. What sustains us in a place where we have no natural power to be? It is the grace of God. What sustains us in existence is the love of God.

These days I am no longer running alongside the Hudson River. My knees protest too much! Now I am on a bicycle rather than on foot, still enjoying the greenway. Lately a new creation called Little Island has taken hold in the river. It's an entire city park suspended on concrete columns that some say look like tulips, and others say look like stiletto high heels. Little Island includes green rolling hills and groves of mature trees. From the bike path you can see that the trees are suspended out there, almost as if on air. The roots of the trees have no depth of soil to anchor them in existence. In times of severe drought I imagine the trees, unable to send roots through the columns, would wither like the grass and die. For them it would be *water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink.*

So what sustains the trees out there? I am not an arborist, but my guess is that no matter how large and proud the trees may grow, they are utterly dependent on the continued ministrations of those who planted them in the sea. Whenever I pedal past Little Island I realize that those trees are a parable of us, full of ourselves though at times we may be. We who share this thing called existence are like trees planted in the sea, and it is God who holds our souls in life. We are servants at the master's table, who invites us to sit *not weighing our merits, but pardoning our offenses.*

Today, the astonishing Word of the Lord is that the Maker of all things has indeed said to us, "*Come here at once and take your place at the table.*" Taste and see how gracious the Lord is. Then, having been nourished at God's table, filled with the Spirit of Christ, and assured that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God, what is to stop us from going forth in peace to love and serve the Lord? Indeed, we can do all things through him who strengthens us.