

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ**  
**Sunday, October 2, 2022**  
**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**The Rev Dr Scott Couper**  
**“Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus”**  
**Third of four in a sermon series entitled “Devotional Songs of Praise”**  
**Christian Scripture: Luke 17:5-10**



This past weekend we witnessed through our televisions, newspapers, and podcasts the devastation wrought in Florida by hurricane Ian. Some of us have property, or even family, in Florida. Therefore, we may have even received first-hand reports of destruction caused by wind and water.<sup>1</sup> Especially on the west coast of Florida and any portion of the state that got caught in certain sections of the eyewall for several hours, I saw terrific images of houses leveled and trees uprooted and felled. It requires a terrific force to uproot a tree.

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<sup>1</sup> We hope for the best for Clyde Johnson, Roger and Judi Miller, Mary Ann Donovan, Janis and Byron Dey, and Kristen and Rich Schellhase (my sister's family).

Uprooting a tree is the subject of the first two verses of our scripture reading (vs 5-6). After the disciples asked Jesus for 'more faith', Jesus replied that even if they had a little, it will go a long way. Jesus' mention of a mustard seed and of a mulberry tree is emblematic. Those of you who are cooks know that a mustard seed is very tiny. More of us are unfamiliar with mulberry trees.



1889 Mulberry Tree by Vincent Van Gogh

Never mind that no one really wants to replant a mulberry tree in the ocean as the text very bizarrely states (vs 6).<sup>2</sup> Some scholars speculate that this crazy statement attributed to Jesus is just one of those cases when one author (the author of Luke) mixes-up two stories or sayings from different sources. The author

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<sup>2</sup> He replied, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.

of Luke perhaps conflated one story from Mark (10:23) and one from Matthew (21:21).<sup>3</sup> No matter. The point is that uprooting a tree is no easy feat.

The well-known homiletics teacher, Don Sunukjian, once taught that “In Jesus’ culture, to uproot a mulberry tree was practically impossible. The mulberry tree was a good-sized tree, upwards of thirty-five feet, three stories high. More importantly, it had roots like no other tree, spreading forty feet in all directions. [...] The roots of a mulberry tree were so extensive and so powerfully entrenched that, according to the rabbis, they would stay in the earth for six-hundred years. To uproot a mulberry tree was a seemingly impossible thing.”<sup>4</sup>

The simple lesson Jesus taught here is that a little faith goes a long way. For me, what is important about faith, even if it is just a little bit, is that it *inspires*. And inspiration feeds. It fuels. It encourages. So, faith can and does grow in time to become inexhaustible and when inspiration and strength are inexhaustible, massive accomplishments are achieved.

I give thanks to God for our Long-Range Planning Team who have worked for over a year and half to help discern paths forward for our church that you the members can deliberate and decide upon so that the ministry of Jesus Christ

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<sup>3</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke: New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1978), 643-4.

<sup>4</sup> Cheryl Lindsay, “Sermon Seeds: Increase Our Faith”, Sunday, October 2, 2022, *Worship Ways*, United Church of Christ. Found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-increase-our-faith/>, accessed October 2, 2022.

continues faithfully and efficiently for decades and centuries to come. I have no doubt that due to the faith of the Long-Range Planning Team, our church will be inspired to implement exciting plans for its future.

The second portion of our scripture (vss 7-10) is as peculiar as the first because most commentaries title it “The Parable of the Unprofitable Servant”. In my opinion, this ‘parable’ is not really a parable. If it is, it is sort of half-baked.<sup>5</sup> Last but not least, I can’t figure out what is ‘unprofitable’ about the servant. No matter.

Rather than ‘unprofitability’, I understand the example Jesus gave about the servant who served his master was about ‘humility’. Jesus essentially advised the disciples to not seek reward, position, or privileges (and therefore access to heaven?) from God for merely doing that which they *should* do. It is a story that advises us, the readers, to not be self-righteous merely because we do the right thing. We do the right thing because it is right; we ought not do right in order to receive a reward.

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<sup>5</sup> I am actually surprised it is in the lectionary calendar. I have not ever, nor have I heard any other minister, preach on these scriptures before.

If this second portion of scripture (vss 7-10) is even remotely related to the first (vss 5-6), the common denominator would be 'faith'.<sup>6</sup> In our story of the obedient servant, we are taught our relationship with God is founded upon 'faith' and not what is often referred to as 'works righteousness'.<sup>7</sup>

Both stories point to the central message of the praise and worship song entitled "'Tis so Sweet to Trust in Jesus" that we focus upon this morning.<sup>8</sup> The thesis of the song is to have faith, to have trust in that which Jesus teaches. The song emphasizes that the strength of our faith comes through listening to God through Jesus, establishing a relationship with God through Jesus, and being inspired by God through Jesus. In short, Jesus' way is to be trusted. The song highlights that it is not our works nor duties performed that save. Conversely, it is also not our sins nor our failures that condemn. The lyrics affirm that neither our

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<sup>6</sup> Many commentators just throw up their hands and suggest that the subject order of previous and following discourses by Jesus to his disciples are simply random and thus likely sourced from texts that are simply 'sayings of Jesus', often without narrative. One example would be the gnostic gospel according to Thomas on which I have preached before.

I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke: New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1978), 643.

<sup>7</sup> Protestant theologians, like Martin Luther, accuse Catholics of practicing 'works righteousness' whereby what one 'does' matters soteriologically, Protestants often argue for a 'justification by faith alone' theology whereby what one believes is primarily, if not determinative, of salvation. Both theologies have their faults, especially when each is taken to its extreme.

<sup>8</sup> The version of the song I chose for this service is performed by 'Lor', a Cameroonian rapper, in honor of World Communion Sunday.

For a very interesting history of the song inspired by a missionary in South Africa and Zimbabwe see: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-tis-so-sweet-to-trust-in-jesus>, accessed October 2, 2022.

good works nor our sins are determinates. Instead, that which justifies us is Jesus giving us “life and rest, and joy and peace”.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”!

## Lyrics

'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,  
Just to take Him at His Word  
Just to rest upon His promise,  
Just to know, "Thus saith the Lord!"

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him!  
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er  
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!  
Oh, for grace to trust Him more!

I'm so glad I learned to trust Him,  
Precious Jesus, Savior, Friend  
And I know that He is with me,  
Will be with me to the end.

Oh, how sweet to trust in Jesus,  
Just to trust His cleansing blood  
And in simple faith to plunge me  
'Neath the healing, cleansing flood!

Yes, 'tis sweet to trust in Jesus,  
Just from sin and self to cease  
Just from Jesus simply taking  
Life and rest, and joy and peace.

Source: [LyricFind](#)

Songwriters: Canzetta Staton / Louisa M. Stead / William James Kirkpatrick

'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus lyrics © Capitol Christian Music Group, Essential Music Publishing, Integrity Music, O/B/O Capasso, Songtrust Ave, Universal Music Publishing Group