

Sermon on Luke 17:5-10

October 13, 2019

Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear friends here at Grace.

Greetings to you from the congregation of St. Thomas in Leipzig, - our council, the St. Thomas Boys Choir, and our members!

This first week of October is an important one for us – we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the *Peaceful Revolution* in 1989.

In the fall of '89 people started taking to the streets, in Leipzig and in other cities in Eastern Germany.

What started small quickly grew larger. In the summer, the Monday peace prayers at St. Nicholas Church

were attended only in double digits. After the prayer service people walked in the streets carrying candles. By October the nave packed more than 2000 people praying for peace, repeating the words, No Violence.

Something was happening, something powerful.

People had had it. Enough of living in houses that were falling apart, enough of the poor living conditions, the scarce, bad food supply, enough of living inside of a large cage. You could not travel to Western countries. Freedom of expression was prohibited. If you criticized the government, you could count on being arrested, or at least expect trouble at school or your place of employment.

The government control, restrictions and pressure had reached a point where people couldn't take it anymore. *Something* had to change.

That meant they needed to overcome their fear. Just in June they had watched the events in

Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China. Tanks drove into crowds of protesters for democracy, killing many.

The people in Leipzig had all reason to expect the same. Members of the East German government had praised the Chinese way as the solution how to deal with protesters. It was announced that on Monday, October 9 police would shoot should people take to the streets again after the peace prayers at St. Nicholas. Already the previous week, demonstrators were brutally beaten and arrested. Starting in the afternoon, a curfew was announced for anyone from out of town. They were to leave the city. But people didn't care. They came anyway. As many as 70 thousand. Maybe fewer, maybe only half that, but thousands filled the small, confined inner city of Leipzig.

What were their motives? – Some wanted freedom of expression, others wanted to travel without restrictions, yet others demonstrated for reliable,

healthy living conditions, and others still were looking for a completely new political system and the end of the Eastern German dictatorship.

That night St. Nicholas was packed. Prayers went on also at St. Thomas and other churches, and afterwards people spilled into the streets. They invited standers-by to join them. It was a peaceful protest. The crowd went on the loop around the immediate inner city. Some carried candles. Most linked their arms together for fear.

At the headquarters of the despised state security services the candles were put on the doorsteps. Had somebody thrown a rock, disaster would have broken loose. The police forces stood ready to strike with ammunition and tanks. But when they saw the massive number of people, they held back. They realized, something is happening here before our eyes that we cannot stop.

The night ended without incident.

Right now, 30 years later, we are discussing, what really was it that took place? And where was the beginning of this Peaceful Revolution?

Some say, it was the church. The mantra of the peace prayers was, No Violence. And: the altar and the street, sanctuary and public life belong together. The pastor of St. Nicholas Church, Christian Fuehrer, always reflected back on October 9 as a “miracle of biblical dimension.”

Others say, sure the church had part in the revolution, but only a small part. It simply was time. The DDR, the German Democratic Republic was done, over.

Another question being debated now is, was it actually a *revolution*, or was it simply an expansion of Western Germany, a takeover of sorts.

We wonder, what does it mean for us today what happened 30 years ago? For us in Germany, and for people around the world who find themselves in places of state sanctioned injustice and oppression.

Very fittingly, our gospel text helps us to get close to what went on inside the people who witnessed this “miracle of biblical dimensions” with their own bodies, their own lives. Jesus talks about the power of faith.

The apostles ask Jesus, Increase our faith! Jesus replies, If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, could say to this mulberry tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it would obey you.

If only, faith the size of a mustard seed – it would suffice to move a mulberry tree.

Well, a mulberry tree has about the strongest roots you can imagine. You *don't move* a mulberry tree. Certainly not an established mulberry tree.

That was exactly the situation of the people in Leipzig 30 years ago. Mustard seed size trust in their own actions, mixed with plenty of fear. What could they ever move in this system of political oppression? Nothing much. Uproot the state security services, the government?

A mustard seed is smaller than a 16th of an inch. You couldn't see it if I had one on my finger. But it quickly grows, even 10 feet tall. It is sown between crops to fertilize the soil. Then it gets plowed under and helps the new crop grow.

The power of the mustard seed lies in springing up mightily and in its useful but transient, transformative nature. The power of the mustard seed is not in itself. It is in preparing the soil for new life to spring up.

[Dear friends, it seemed impossible to move that totalitarian Eastern German system, much less uproot it. The government was having nothing of

Gorbachev's "glasnost" (openness) and "perestroika" (change). They looked down their noses on President Gorbachev's attempts to reform the Soviet Union.]

The peaceful protests continued all over Eastern Germany until finally the wall came down in Berlin on November 9. The television broadcasted it live. It was literally unbelievable. We saw what we saw and could not believe it. Every German remembers where they were on that November 9.

I was in Australia. At a gas station. In the Outback. My Australian friends went inside the gas station to pay. The TV was on. Returning to the car, they said, have you heard, there are people dancing on top of the wall in Berlin.

I said, no one is dancing on the wall in Berlin. They'd get shot right away. But indeed, there were people on top the wall. I saw it and could not believe the pictures.

What happened in October in Leipzig is exactly like Jesus' word of the mustard seed. Faith like a mustard seed has enormous power, and nourishes the soil for something entirely new to grow.

That, dear friends, is the legacy of the Peaceful Revolution 30 years ago for our own time today. Nothing has to stay the way it is. The smallest beginnings of something new, the smallest bit of trust and faith can grow mightily. And that mighty growth is not even an end to itself but is meant to give itself up again to provide and nourish the next new thing, a whole new life, new realities for more growth and trust and faith to happen.

"Increase our faith." Who has not once asked that, prayed that just like the apostles. Jesus' reply is not so much scolding them for their small faith, their vanishing trust in the face of overwhelming circumstances. Rather, Jesus encourages his followers: Don't give up. You *have* faith, and look,

what a mustard seed can do. God is here to nourish your mustard seed size faith and trust . See, it is already growing!

What God can do with our mustard seed faith – we saw that on October 9, 1989.

But still, the examples of others and from history do not prevent our own faith to sometimes just slip away. We can't seem to hold on to it. We plead with God, don't let me lose my faith. It is so small!

We despair after the death of our loved ones. We despair in the face of a diagnosis that cannot be turned around. We despair in the face of addictions.

In the face of such crises, the body of Christ - that is pastors, caregivers, family members, friends - the body of Christ rallies and surrounds the desperate with God's encouragement. Our faith, may it be small like a

mustard seed, opens wide its mighty arms and speaks of God's love, God's power, God's healing.

Even when we cry to God, why is my faith leaving me now? have you forsaken me? there is still relationship, still claiming that God is present and hears my complaint.

Christ cried to God from the cross, why have you forsaken me? Jesus' faith seemed to crumble, break down in the suffering on the cross. Yet God moved that tree of death that nobody could ever move – moved it out, pulled it, limbs, trunk, roots and all, in Christ's rising from the tomb.

Sisters and brothers, our faith does not need to be especially strong, or big, or beautiful, or mighty. But be prepared, our small faith can cause mighty things to happen.

Even our small faith prepares the soil for something new, a beautiful, life-giving, new creation.

Nobody believed that a Peaceful Revolution could ever take place. That the totalitarian system of Eastern Germany could be moved, uprooted and gone.

It is the mustard seed of God's peace, God's victory over death planted inside us, that fertilizes and transforms our lives here and now – personally, globally, in Germany, in the United States, and everywhere. Out of this new soil and life new mustard seeds of faith grow all the time and everywhere. Mightily.

And for that I give thanks.

Amen.

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