

CELEBRATE THE GIFTS OF WOMEN SUNDAY ❖ MARCH 8, 2020

Honoring Women's Spirituality, Struggle and Survival

MATTHEW 5:3

BY ROSEMARY C. MITCHELL



Peace Within, Jenny Grant

In 2020, on Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday, we honor women of faith, those who may have felt their faith falter at times and those who held fast to faith. We give thanks for their persistence—their witness, their words, their actions. We know we stand on their shoulders.

My very first piece of jewelry was a mustard seed pendant. It was a gift from my mother. Maybe you have seen this piece of jewelry, or even received one yourself. It was a small, glass globe, threaded onto a silver chain holding one very tiny mustard seed. I remember how delighted I was to be given a gift that had so much importance. Looking back, what I felt at the time but was not able to articulate was that “I mattered.” I mattered to my family, to my church and to God.

My family was one of deep faith and faithfulness, but neither my mother nor my grandmother talked much about their faith. Both women lived it. It was just the air they breathed every day. No need to talk about it. Just do it.

Looking back, I see that each day, they lived a faith that made a difference in others’ lives. Our house was always open. There was always room at the table. There was always a welcome and a smile. We didn’t call it “safe space,” but the women in the family created safe space for everyone. It was a place you could just be and breathe.

The theme for this year is based on Matthew 5:3: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Eugene Peterson, in *The Message Bible*, writes: “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.”¹

Eugene Peterson captures exactly how I experienced my life with my mother and grandmother. They both understood the limits of their own humanity and the incredible power of God in their lives. They were women who were confident in God’s blessing and grace. Through nothing of their own doing, God was with them. Because of that powerful faith, they could live authentic, welcoming, fearlessly hospitable lives. They knew that God is in charge, that everything happens in “God’s good time,” and that they were a part of God’s plan for creation.

This trust in God also applies to what some call “mustard seed faith.” Mustard seed faith does not depend on me. It begins where my strength ends. I may be poor in spirit or meek, but I am assured that God is in charge. Like a life of discipleship, mustard seed faith doesn’t stay small. It is meant to grow. As a child I believed that the parable and the gift of the mustard seed were my reinforcements for life. I might only be a child, but I would grow and persist. As I grew in faith, I knew I was called to live as best I could in God’s here and now, in God’s “middle time.” If God blesses the meek (and Matthew 5:5 assures us God does) and if God can use a tiny mustard seed, then God could use even me.

My faith was not a nostalgic faith, and neither was it about dreaming of the great by and by. Rather, I would continually be strengthened to face whatever was set before me in life because I was assured that God was in charge. I grew in grace and the wisdom that God is with me every step of the way. God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good.

As an adult and as a pastor, I recognize that I am indeed blessed, even in those times when I am “poor in spirit” or “meek.” (Yes, those moments still happen!) I have also increased my understanding of that little mustard seed.

I laughed when I learned that a mustard plant is a weed. Being a weed means it grows in places where it is not welcome. Why would Jesus use such an example? What was Jesus really saying about the meek? What was he saying about that little seed? Honestly, it reminded me of when I was first ordained, more than 40 years ago. Not everyone had the eyes to see how God was calling me to ministry.

The way of God can be quiet, slow, humble and, at times, barely perceptible. The image of a mustard plant as “the greatest of shrubs” is a jarring symbol. It is not a majestic tree. If we have faith as small as a mustard seed, God is with us and will help us move a mountain, overcome adversity, or just get through our day. God is at work through us as we gather our courage to be persistent.

God does not give up on us, because we are the hands and feet of Christ.

To be “poor in spirit” or to have faith the size of a mustard seed are points along the way of my journey of faith. They can be resting points. They can be plateaus. Even if only a tiny bit of faith remains, God is still with us and blesses us.

God is always at work. God can be working quietly through us when we pray and write letters, when we speak up and speak out, when we take a meal to a friend or visit a stranger in prison, when we serve those in need right outside the doors of our church or on the other side of the world. God is with us. God will use each of us—even me and even you.

A Service for the Worship of God

Call to Worship

Leader: O Lord, open my eyes,

People: so I might see the vision of your truth.

Leader: O Lord, open my ears,

People: and I will hear your word.

Leader: O Lord, open my lips,

People: and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

Suggested Hymns²

“All Who Love and Serve Your City” (GtG 351)

“Be Thou My Vision” (GtG 450)

“How Clear is Our Vocation, Lord” (GtG 432)

“Open My Eyes, That I May See” (GtG 451)

“Though I May Speak” (GtG 693)

Call to Confession³

To you, O God, we give up the burdens of this week, trusting your love and mercy.

To you, O God, we surrender ourselves, trusting our risen Lord to lead us always in the way of peace, today, tomorrow and forever.

Prayer of Confession (unison)

O God, we confess that we often look back.

We look back on mistakes we have made, work left undone,

people we have hurt, and excuses we have made.

We see these as things for which we feel guilty.

We overwhelm ourselves with regret.

Free us, O God, from self-condemnation that immobilizes us.

Allow us to remember that you call us to look back, to remember those times of joy,

to remember those people who were kind and compassionate,

to remember that we did the best we were able to do,

to remember that in Christ our past is transformed,

to remember that your journey with us each day of our life.

May we continue to grow in grace and truth.

Passing the Peace

Let us offer and receive the peace of Christ as a sign of God’s grace and an assurance of forgiveness.

Leader: The peace of Christ be with you.

People: And also with you.

Prayer for Illumination⁴

Inhabit our hearts, God of history, as you once inhabited human flesh. Be here among us with all of your wisdom, all of your power, all of your mercy, all of your love, that we might learn to be like God, from our God who came to be like us. Holy are you. Holy are we who are one with you forever. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Matthew 5:1–7

Matthew 13:3–32

Matthew 17:20

2 Timothy 1:4–7

Time of Reflection and Sharing in Pairs or Small Groups

Try this exercise from professor Thomas Troeger: “Pick one word in each column to form a prayer that represents your relationship with God. If you cannot find the precise word you want in a column, supply your own. But limit it to one word, no long phrases or hyphenated constructions. The struggle to find a single word will force greater clarity within you.”⁵

(Pick one from each column)

Image of God	
Eternal	God
Loving	Lord
Judging	Christ
Tender	Jesus
Demanding	Spirit
Healing	Love
Heavenly	Being
Earthly	Mother
Unknown	Father
Intimate	Savior

your

(Pick one from each column)

Image of Self	
believing	daughter
doubting	son
angry	child
happy	disciple
seeking	friend
trusting	priest
hurting	creature
thankful	servant
anxious	follower
peaceful	rebel

(Pick one from each column)

Image of Communication	
prays for	love
cries for	faith
demands	money
wants	food
needs	meaning
despairs of	comfort
wishes for	understanding
doubts	forgiveness
wonders about	joy
thanks you for	health

Next, in small groups or pairs, share the prayers that were created with words from the boxes above.

Closing Prayer

“The Middle Time”

Between the exhilaration of Beginning . . .
And the satisfaction of Concluding,
Is the Middle-Time
of Enduring . . . Changing . . . Trying . . .
Despairing . . . Continuing . . . Becoming.

Jesus Christ was the One of God’s Middle-Time
between Creation and . . . accomplishment.
Through him, God said of Creation,
“Without Mistake.” And of Accomplishment,
“Without Doubt.”

And we, in our Middle-Times, of wondering and
waiting, hurrying and hesitating, regretting . . .
We who are becoming more . . . and less
through the evidence of God’s Middle-Time
have a stabilizing hint that we are not mistakes,
that we are irreplaceable, that our being is of
interest, and our doing is of purpose.
That our being and our doing are surrounded by Amen.

Jesus Christ is the Completer of unfinished people
with unfinished work in unfinished times.

May he keep us from sinking, from ceasing, from
wasting, from solidifying, that we may be for him—
Experimenters, Enablers, Encouragers,
and Associates in Accomplishment.⁶

Benediction

Philippians 4:8, adapted

Now, as friends:

May all that is true,
all that is noble,
all that is just and right,
all that is lovable and gracious,
whatever is excellent and admirable,
fill our thoughts and our hearts.

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Notes

1. Matthew 5:5, *The Message Bible* by Eugene H. Peterson. Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018.
2. GtG indicates *Glory to God! The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013).
3. Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship, Daily Prayer* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 71.
4. Adapted from Miriam Therese Winter, *WomanPrayer, WomanSong* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 74.
5. Thomas Troeger, *Creating Fresh Images for Preaching: New Rungs for Jacob’s Ladder* (King of Prussia, PA: Judson, 1982), 22.
6. Lona Fowler, *Images: Women in Transition*, edited by Janice Grana (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1976).

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