

October 2, 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

by [Jennifer Moland-Kovash](#) in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue

More days than not, I watch some form of baseball. Practices, games, and highlights from previous games all dance across my vision. Sometimes I settle in willingly; other times it's an enthusiastic, "Watch this, Mom!" that has me turning my head. The games I watch most closely—in terms of both interest level and physical proximity—are those played by my son and his cohort of 11-and-under buddies.

So I hear the first couple of verses of this passage from Luke with Jesus taking on the tone of a youth baseball coach. Let me paraphrase a bit. Imagine, if you will, a group of youngsters surveying the schedule for the weekend tournament and then saying to their coach, "Increase our skill." (You can decide for yourself the degree of attitude in their tone.)

And their coach, having chosen them months earlier from a field of players, having worked through endless drills and pitched countless balls for batting practice, having reviewed previous games with them, says with a twinge of frustration, "If you had as much skill as this water bottle, you could say to the ball, 'Sail off the end of my bat and over the fence,' and it would listen to you."

There is a touch of hyperbole in Jesus' response to the disciples. This Gospel passage is not one that has good news jumping right out of it. These short verses come off as disjointed—and indeed, they are part of a collection of gathered sayings. There is little context and even less of a tidy story upon which to build a sermon. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't wrestle with them.

I've never attempted to move a mulberry tree with my faith, or any other plant for that matter. I use a shovel and a wagon. But I've hoped for some difficult things to change: illnesses cured, relationships mended, peace on earth. Sadly, people still die, ends come instead of reconciliation, and I doubt we will have achieved peace between writing and publication. Is it because my faith is lacking that these things seem to remain the same? Do I not have faith even the size of a mustard seed?

Reading this passage with that mind-set of scarcity can be difficult: I must not have very much faith, because I can't move that tree. *O Lord, I begin to pray. I need more*

*faith in order to change things—I don't have what I need within me; increase my faith.* I'm not alone in my echo of the disciples' plea, am I? I imagine that we've all had the feeling that our faith doesn't measure up a time or two or six, today already or at least this week.

Good coaches encourage their players to develop their skills and push themselves because the coach already sees in these players what they cannot see in themselves: that they already have the ability, if they but believe and trust. And so it is with Jesus' response to the apostles. Jesus' words imply not that they are lacking but that they already have the faith they seek.

But even knowing that Jesus believes the apostles already have the faith they need within themselves, how do we move beyond believing that we need more faith? How do we hear these words as Jesus not scolding the apostles but instead reminding them that they have what they need, encouraging them to dig deep? You won't find an answer if you look at the verses that follow in Luke; the next passage doesn't really enlighten this one.

Instead, I would turn to 2 Timothy's introduction for a word of encouragement in our faith. There are many places within this passage to find strength. The epistle reading connects us to the faith of the matriarchs and to how that faith lives on in Timothy. What better way to honor the faith of those who have gone before us—especially the women—and to build up the faith within and among us now than to say that it is still alive because it has been passed on for generations. The author encourages Timothy: "For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands."

I'm more than a bit smitten with the image of rekindling the gift of God that is within us. By looking to the faith fires of the past, we can see how faith will grow again, how it will ultimately be passed on to the generations to come. Don't be ashamed, says 2 Timothy; join us. The gift that we have from God burns within us.

The letter to Timothy reminds us all that the story of Jesus is alive among our communities and within us. We have been filled with that spirit: a spirit of power and love and self-discipline. Can I move a mulberry tree with that spirit? Probably not. But I'll go out on a limb here and say that I don't think that's how Jesus wants me to use it. Instead, our faith points to God's power, not our own. Our faith points to how God has called us according to God's purpose and grace, not our own. I'll leave it up to God to move the trees, and I'll tell the story.