

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year C
Lamentations 1:1-6, Psalm 137,
2 Timothy 1:1-14, Luke 17:5-10

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William & Mary Sunday
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church, Toano, VA
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Channing Moore Williams may not be a household name, even though he is recognized by the Episcopal Church as having lived a remarkable life of faith.¹ Even though we as Episcopalians continue to debate what it means to venerate a person, even deigning to call such people “saints,” Channing Moore Williams has made every list we’ve come up with – you can pick up a prayer book in front of you and turn to page 30, and there we list Williams on December 2nd.²

Williams was born in Richmond, Virginia in 1829, and grew up in a faithful household of six children; so faithful, in fact, his parents named him after Richard Channing Moore, then the bishop of Virginia.³ Williams moved around a bit, living in Kentucky for a time while he saved up money to attend college. There, he felt the call to ordained ministry, and following his undergraduate education, moved to Alexandria to attend seminary.

Virginia Theological Seminary was a remarkable place at the time – when he arrived in the fall of 1852, he found a community with a deep focus on missionary work. And so, upon his graduation in 1855, he answered a call to serve as a missionary in China. Just getting there was an act of faith: he sailed, and I mean that literally, from New York, and did not arrive in China until eight months later – having survived storms and icebergs and other challenges. He stepped ashore, not knowing a word of any Chinese dialect.

“Increase our faith!”⁴ the apostles say to Jesus, and you can almost hear them begging our Lord to give them the magic formula. When we consider a faithful life, perhaps even such a life of faith that warrants inclusion on a list in our prayer book of remarkable people, we might expect to hear stories of grand actions: the sacrifices of martyrs, preaching to thousands, the revelation of deep theological scholarship that opens the eyes of many.

But that’s not how Jesus responds. To those pleas of “Increase our faith!” we could rightfully expect Jesus to tell the apostles to leap over mountains in his name. Instead, Jesus begins his response by summoning the image of a mustard seed. Now, this should sound familiar, and undoubtedly it was to Jesus’ followers, too. If we flip back to the thirteenth chapter of Luke, we hear Jesus’ Parable of the Mustard Seed:

¹ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2018*, <https://extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/21034>, 522-3.

² *Book of Common Prayer*, 30. The newest edition of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (cited above) moves his commemoration, in conjunction with his missionary colleague Joseph Schereschewsky, to October 14.

³ Tucker, Beverley D. "Channing Moore Williams (1829-1910): Apostle to Japan." *Anglican and Episcopal History* 66, no. 3 (1997): 269-302. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42611874>.

⁴ Luke 17:5 NRSV.

“He said therefore, ‘What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.’”⁵

We don’t actually ever hear this parable in our Sunday readings, though two out of every three years we hear one of the other versions from Mark and Matthew.⁶ So when Jesus responds, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed,” we know this is Jesus code for something small that can grow into something grand, not only in size but in impact.

To explore the life of Channing Moore Williams on this day might seem like an odd choice: Jesus is, in effect, telling us that even lives of miniscule faith can grow to something grand, yet Williams made the monumental choice to sail through two oceans to a foreign land to spread the Gospel in a language he didn’t know to people who did not necessarily wish to hear it. That sounds like a life of faith kindled by something larger than a mustard seed.

But Williams hardly lived a glamorous life. Upon arriving in Shanghai, he immediately set off to ... learn Chinese. And, given that he answered a call to serve all of China, he studied not only the local dialect Wu, but also Mandarin, and the scholarly dialect Wen-li. Early in his tenure, he remarked, “I hope to preach a little after a year. One day is like another until we learn the language.”⁷ And even after that year of study leading up to his ordination as a priest in 1857, his ministry bore little fruit – he traveled only a few miles, speaking to few, preaching rarely and with minimal proficiency. He and his colleagues established a few missionary stations, but most lasted months rather than years.

Yet, Channing Moore Williams remained faithful, even in the face of a life where he struggled to communicate his core message to a people who were often unreceptive to Christianity, all the while thousands of miles from home, watching his fellow missionaries routinely succumb to various ailments. What’s remarkable about Williams is not that his faith could have been compared to anything larger than a mustard seed, but that he clung to any faith at all.

This Sunday, we find ourselves in the midst of our stewardship season here at Hickory Neck. And, as we have combined our two major annual stewardship efforts, we focus this month not simply on financial stewardship, but also the stewardship of our time and talent. If we take a moment to step back and look at the ministry and mission of this beloved community, we would be excused for believing we each need to live lives of faith much greater than a mustard seed, or even the great tree that can spring forth from such a humble seed. Hickory Neck is a community of great impact – in the lives of those present here today, and throughout our community. In just a few weeks we will host our annual Fall Festival, the proceeds from which will improve the lives of countless many in our midst right here in James City County. And if you look at the signup sheet – which I know you have, since it’s covered in lights and you can see it from here – you know it takes a great deal of work to do just this one piece of what we feel called to here at Hickory Neck. Perhaps you’ve perused your Time and Talent form and found the list of ministries overwhelming – checking one or two boxes might not seem as if it will make a dent in the needs of this church.

⁵ Luke 13:18-19.

⁶ Matthew 13:31–32 (Proper 11A), Mark 4:30-32 (Proper 6B).

⁷ Tucker, 275.

But Jesus shows us today that we are called to live lives of constant faith, rather than lives of tremendous acts of faith.⁸ Jesus, as fully divine but also fully human, understands that when we turn toward God, constant and steady in our lifelong faith, we cannot help but have an impact on the world around us. In answering our call to be good stewards of this place, we do so from the abilities God has granted each of us, in the knowledge that together we can fulfill the lifegiving ministry of Hickory Neck.

We are not expected to join that short list of remarkable people in the front of our prayer books – we don't have to, Jesus tells us, in order for our lives of faith to have an impact on others. That which seems small and insignificant can grow into something great.

There's one more reason for us to remember Channing Moore Williams on this day, this William & Mary Sunday: Williams graduated from the College of William & Mary in 1852. Though this might make some sense, given his youth in Richmond, the mere fact he attended William & Mary at all is notable: when he graduated in 1852, he was one of only eight to receive a diploma, and he alone stood out: the other seven were awarded bachelor degrees, but Williams received a master of arts⁹. If you know your William & Mary history – and I know some of you here today know it far better than I do – you are aware that William & Mary survived through a lean time in these days, and relied on the faith of a few to survive through the Civil War. But survive it did. And I am heartened to think that, on his travels to William & Mary, Channing Moore Williams might well have looked out from his carriage or horse and pondered an old brick church, standing just on the outskirts of the town of Toano.

Channing Moore Williams answered a call, first to China, then only a few years later to move to Japan – to learn yet another language, to translate the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer into the language of a people who were weary at best of Americans, to say the least for Christianity. But a decade later, the door opened: restrictions on Western thought were eased, and Williams became the first Episcopal Bishop of Japan – even though he spent his first few years as a bishop as the only missionary for the entire country. Today, St. Paul's University in Tokyo, founded by Channing Moore Williams, educates nearly 20,000 undergraduates each year.¹⁰

We are faced with the daily task of answering God's call, a task that at times seems insurmountable. And today, Jesus tells us: yes, expecting us each to have lives of tremendous and vast faith is a tall order for most of us. Though the cry to "increase our faith!" is a natural one, Jesus shows us it's the wrong way to look at our lives. Have faith: Jesus tells us it's as simple as that. Have faith as insignificant as a mustard seed, but cling to that meager seed even if that's all you can do. For we know not how God will use that small reflection of faith to grow into something vast, lifegiving, and sustaining.

⁸ See: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4200.

⁹ Tucker, 273.

¹⁰ https://english.rikkyo.ac.jp/about/at_a_glance/index.html.