

“Moving Mountains”

**Matthew 17:14-21**

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The scripture lesson this morning comes from Matthew 17:14-21. “Jesus and his disciples returned to the crowd and a man knelt before him and said Lord have pity on my son. He has a bad case of epilepsy and often falls into a fire or into water. I brought him to your disciples but none of them could heal him. Jesus said, "You people are too stubborn to have any faith. How much longer must I be with you. Why do I have to put up with you. Bring the boy here." Then Jesus spoke sternly to the demon. It went out of the boy and right then he was healed. Later the disciples went to Jesus in private and asked him, why couldn't we force the demon out. Jesus replied, it is because you do not have enough faith, but I can promise you this, if you have faith no larger than a mustard seed you could tell this mountain to move from here to there and it would. Everything would be possible for you.” The word of God, for the people of God, thanks be to God!

This is an appropriate passage for lent, particularly because of the context. In Chapter 16, Jesus questions his disciples, asking them "Who do the crowds say that I am." and Peter, speaking on behalf of the 12, perks up and answers "You are the Christ, the son of the living God.", and in all of the gospels that is a turning point in the story. Literally Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem. Before this he has been traveling about Galilee in that area and teaching and preaching the crowds in the general. But from the moment Peter proclaims "You are the Christ", Jesus starts his journey towards Jerusalem. We are in chapter 17 so obviously there is a lot of story left but time is drawing to a close and so there is a sense of urgency, a kind of energy and a focus that enters the narrative because of this journey to Jerusalem. Jesus is on his way to the cross. He is about to be crucified. And his teaching is no longer just to the crowds in general but he really starts focusing in on the disciples, and for good reason; we'll get into that in a moment. But to understand what is going on in this passage in particular, there is the confession, you are the Christ by the disciples, then Jesus takes Peter, James and John and goes up on the mountaintop. There he experiences the transfiguration and so these three disciples see him, Jesus, in all of his glory. But, meanwhile, the other nine are down the mountain and the crowds and people are still coming to Jesus but Jesus isn't available so they have to stop and deal with these nine disciples. It is in that context then, that this story is set.

The story really isn't about the miracle but about a lesson that Jesus has for the disciples. It is not so much about the healing itself but the lesson that it affords, the opportunity it affords Jesus to teach. Specifically to teach the disciples. This is really the first time in the gospels that the disciples have to do ministry, have to teach, have to do miracles, without Jesus standing over their shoulders, without the other three, without their presence right there. And if this is a sign of things to come, they don't do very well.

As we read through this passage, Jesus' response to the disciples is kind of this blast, it almost seems out of proportion. And yet there is a part of this, that his response, his anger seems entirely appropriate. Jesus after all has already given the disciples the authority to cast out demons and yet for whatever reason that wasn't enough, at least not in this case. They had the promise or the assurance from Jesus, that you can do this, I have given you this authority, this power, and yet they fail. And when they come back to Jesus later in the passage and say "why couldn't we do it?" and he said "because you don't have enough faith."

Well what exactly does that mean, to not have enough faith? I think it probably breaks into one of two areas because of Jesus response to the disciples. The two sides, or two possibilities, are that they were so confident in and of themselves that they failed to exercise their faith. They failed to seek God first before they went to heal this boy. They were so convinced that they could do this on their own, they were treating faith like it was something that they possessed, like a dollar in their pocket, and having it that was enough, it was a commodity to be used.

Or, on the other hand, this is the first time they have had to continue on the ministry of Christ without Christ physically present. Or, without the presence of the three, the leaders of the 12, they weren't even there to lead and to guide and to give direction. So the nine are on their own and maybe they were just feeling left on their own or abandoned, they questioned their ability to tap into the power of God without Jesus physically present or without the three.

Either way, they fail. Either by being over confident in their own ability or being under confident of their ability to access the power of God. But, either way I think the big idea that Jesus is getting at here is that there is a failure to launch on the part of the disciples, and it's because of this that his anger seems entirely appropriate. Remember the context after all, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, he is about to be crucified and he is about to leave earth forever. He has spent three years of his life pouring his teaching into these men, showing them and bringing them along in his ministry so that they could see first hand and that they could participate with him. In fact there are examples where we know that they have participated in the work of Christ and in what he was doing. And yet when it came to this test, this first opportunity, without him right there, they failed. No wonder he is mad, he is frustrated, he is maybe even a little bit frightened. Because, if these guys fail, it's finished.

Think about this. If when Jesus is crucified and gone, no longer physically present on earth, if the 12 can't do it, the mission ends right there. God's plan for saving the world, hits a dead end. That's it. These 12 are not the second string, they're not the alternative, they are the main deal, they're the plan. This is the way that God, that Jesus, chose to save the world. And if they fail to carry on his mission when he is gone, then the mission fails, this is it. So, Jesus is angry.

You can almost hear in his words the accusation; how much more time, how many more sermons, how many more miracles do you need before you can do this on my behalf. Before you understand that the power of God is available to you. Before you can exercise your faith

enough to continue this ministry and this mission. How much more? And as I read the story, I think, come on you guys, are you ever going to figure this out! After all Peter has just proclaimed of Jesus you are the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus has given them the promises, he has given them the authority.

And yet, somewhere in the back of my mind, even as I berate the disciples for their lack of faith, I hear the voice of Jesus speaking to me. Jesus asks "Gary, how much more training, how much more teaching, how many more sermons, how many more studies, how many more classes do you need before you take my word, before you can exercise your faith and take it out into the world and make a difference, that you can continue this mission? How much more? And I hear the challenge in that for all of us, how many more sermons? How many more classes? How much more do you and I need before we will exercise our faith and take our place alongside Jesus in fulfilling the ministry that he has called us to. Because the fact of the matter is, we are not spectators.

The disciples hadn't quite figured that out yet here, obviously, because they can't get it done. They've been along for the ride for three years. "Geez Jesus, that was a great sermon, thanks." "Those miracles were incredible, I appreciate it." But when Jesus asks them to do the same they fall flat on their faces. Fortunately, you and I are here so we know that at some point they get it, they catch on. But the challenge still stands; the challenge still stands for us. In fact, Jesus says, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed. Basically to have less faith than a mustard seed would be to have no faith at all. The smallest of seeds that were planted, and yet even that much faith gives the disciples, gives us, the access to an incredible power.

One of the images Jesus uses in this passage that is kind of worth giving history on, is this whole moving mountains bit. Herod was an insanely jealous man and insanely paranoid in terms of protecting his power and his position. As such he did a lot of building and a lot of fortresses built, but there were three main ones. Maybe you are familiar with Masada which overlooked the salt flats and the Dead Sea and it sits on top of this enormous pinnacle of rock. And on top of that they built huge walls and battlements that could hold off--well even a small army of Jewish rebels held off the Roman army for an entire year in Masada. That was to the east. He built another one to the south because he was also paranoid about an invasion from Egypt and so he had the Herodian built, named it after himself. Again, natural defenses that were impressive to say the least. Then he added to that the walls and the towers and the gates and all of that. Well, when he went to the north there were no natural defenses, there was just a big plain. So, Herod had a mountain moved in, literally he had a mountain moved. That mountain was in view, that fortress was in view, from where Jesus was standing with his disciples. Can you imagine the hundreds of thousands of hours, the sweat, the toil, the effort, the agony, that it took to move that mountain from wherever it came from--because archaeologists still aren't sure where Herod got all the rock and the dirt that makes up that mountain--but he had it moved from somewhere and built this up and put his fortress on the top of it. Yet, at the disciples disposal is power like that, even more. With faith the size of a

mustard seed, if they have any faith at all, if they practice that faith, that kind of power is available for them and it's available for us.

So Jesus gives them, gives us, the challenge, will we practice it, will we move beyond spectators and become players? Will we participate in this mission of God? So the question becomes, for us, where do you, or where will you, serve? Because we are not simply here on Sunday morning to be entertained. I'm sure you could all find something far more entertaining to do than to listen to me talk. We're here because God has invited us, God has challenged us, to be a part of his mission, to be a part of his plan for saving the world. How and where will you participate in that mission? Because, although we are in the season of Lent and still on our journey to the cross, Jesus has finished his trip to Jerusalem. He has been crucified and he is resurrected and he is in heaven in glory and so now it is up to you and me, because Jesus has no hands, no feet, no voice on this earth but you and I. The mission of God hinges upon us. Upon whether we will take up this challenge and become players and not just spectators.

Would you pray with me? Lord, we thank you for the love, the grace, the power that you have poured out upon us. Help us to lay hold, to lay claim to that. To use our faith, that we might experience the fullness of all the gifts you have given us and then experiencing that, laying hold of that, might we take it out into the world so that our spouses, our family, our coworkers or our classmates, our friends, and community members, might see by our words and our actions the hands and the feet and the voice of Christ. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.