

Faith That Moves Mountains

Matthew 17: 14-23

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Years ago we were driving home on Interstate 64. Coming around a hidden bend in the road, I saw a disabled car pulling a trailer that had jackknifed in the middle of the highway. They had blown one of the tires on their trailer. The family was piling out of the car. It was a situation ripe for a huge multi-car pile-up and a lot of injured people. As soon as I could, I pulled to the side of the road. Cars coming at a high rate of speed around that blind curve would never be able to see the accident in time to slow down and stop. Running back to the curve, I started waving my arms at the oncoming traffic and fortunately they realized that something was amiss in front of them. A terrible tragedy was averted. Likewise, all of us have probably been involved at some point in our lives with a similar set of circumstances. We came across a situation that required our personal intervention. We helped someone who was desperately in need of our assistance.

Such was the case when Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration. Entering a village at the foot of the mountain, He was immediately confronted by a chaotic scene. A crowd of people was coming towards Him with a determined sense of urgency. At the head of this crowd was a distraught villager. Coming to a halt and then knelling before Jesus, this villager was terribly upset. Failing even to introduce himself, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, have mercy on my son." Obviously he knew who Jesus was and had come to Him for help. The next words literally tumbled from his lips just like a parent with a sick child talking to a doctor in the emergency room of a hospital. He said, "My son has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him" (Matthew 17:14-16).

Confronted by this situation, an entire range of emotions coursed through the mind and heart of Jesus. He saw the distress of the father and was moved by the urgency of his request. On so many other occasions people had approached Him with the same kind of needs—leprosy, blindness, palsy. This father's plea for help awakened Jesus' compassion. It also awakened a sense of disappointment. Earlier in His ministry He had sent His disciples to the surrounding towns and villages to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom. He also told them to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers and drive out demonic spirits (Matthew 10:7-8). Obviously, they were still not capable of living up to their calling. Frustrated and perhaps a little angry, Jesus said,

“O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me” (Matthew 17:17). Jesus then rebuked the demonic spirit that had taken possession of the boy’s body and he was healed.

This event was one of those pivotal moments in the life and ministry of Jesus. It was not forgotten. It is recorded in three of the four Gospels, chapter seventeen in Matthew, chapter nine in Mark and chapter nine in Luke. For that reason if none other, we need to take a look at what is happening in these passages of Scriptures. There are some truths here that we need to examine.

Here’s the first one. Jesus was not “Mr. Milk Toast.” He had real and at times very powerful emotions. Often He is portrayed as a mild mannered gentleman who never had an unkind thing to say to anybody. That is simply not true. He had a deep well of compassionate concern for the poor and the lowly. That’s why He spent so much of His time reaching out to those in need, whether they were an individual who was ill or a multitude who were hungry. But He was also the kind of person who could give voice to His anger and frustration and this was one those occasions. Neither the crowd nor His disciples could access the kind of faith that opens the door to God’s presence and power. In spite of everything that He had said and shown them, His disciples still could not put their faith to work in a way that made a real difference. I wonder at times if Jesus does not get a bit angry and frustrated with us for the same reason. We talk about having faith, but we are either reluctant or don’t know how to put it to work.

Here’s the second truth within this passage of Scripture that we need to examine. No one is immune to evil. It’s both real and present. Talk to the people of Ukraine and they will tell you that evil is very real and very present. It falls out of the sky every evening when the Russian rockets begin to fall upon their homes and cities. Yes, there is a lot of evil in this world and sometimes it arrives with a personal agenda, to attack us as individuals. That was the situation that this father faced with his son. The presence of evil in that day and time was associated with illness. To be ill possibly meant that you were possessed by an evil spirit, a demon who could cause torment, pain and even death. Such was the case with the father’s son, thrown about by a demon’s presence within his body. Today we would say that the child was experiencing seizures. In one translation of this passage of Scripture, the seizures are even identified as being epileptic in nature. So what was really going on within that young man’s life? We will never know, but there is one thing which is clearly evident. Evil disrupts and brings harm to that which is good and it can slip into our lives almost unnoticed, like an unseen germ or virus. Then it begins to weave its pattern

of destruction. Years ago I saw an example of its power to destroy. I met a man suffering from an acute case of arthritis, hardly able to move. Its origin was unknown. However, he had allowed and indeed cherished a spirit of intense bitterness towards his brother. Having been trained during my internship in pastoral care that our emotions play an important part in our physical well-being, I couldn't help but sense that the man's intense arthritic pain probably had something to do with the bitterness which had taken control of his life. It had become a demon inflecting pain and paralysis.

That brings us to one last, but very important aspect of this Scriptural account. After Jesus healed the boy, the disciples came to Him and asked why they had not been able to drive out the evil spirit. In response, Jesus said, "Because you have so little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20). The reason for their inability to heal the father's son, therefore, seems to be that they needed more faith. They needed an extra helping of faith in order to make the boy whole again. However, upon closer examination that is not what Jesus was saying at all. It was not a greater amount of faith that was needed, a tiny amount no bigger than a mustard seed would be adequate. Rather it was the focus of their faith that was of crucial importance. In Mark's account, which provides more information about what took place, Jesus told the father that all things are possible for those who believe. The father replied, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24)! He was acknowledging his lack of faith in the hope that Jesus could help him find an additional quantity of that precious commodity as payment for the healing of his son. Thankfully, no additional faith was necessary and that is something that Jesus was pointing out when He told the disciples that only a little bit can move a mountain. It's not the amount of faith, but rather the focus of the faith that makes the difference.

Perhaps verse 21 in Matthew's account can throw some additional light on what I'm driving at. It read, "But this kind does not come out except by prayer and fasting." It describes the kind of faith that is necessary when dealing with the really tough issues in life, like the persistent presence of evil. This verse is not found in some of the most ancient New Testament manuscripts. Nevertheless, it points us in the right direction with regards to what it means to have faith. Faith is not believing that God is going to do something for us. It is simply placing ourselves and our situation into the hands of God. It is focusing not on what we need, but rather on the One who provides what we need. When we pray and fast we are crawling up into the lap of God and simply saying, "Hold me. I'm trusting in You and in You alone."

So to wrap things up let me remind you of a biblical story found in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Remember those three brothers who would not bow to Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue? The king of the Babylonians gave them one last chance before being thrown into a fiery furnace. This is how they responded to the king's threat, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Daniel 3:17-18). Were they trusting in what God was going to do for them or were they simply trusting in the Lord regardless of whether or not He delivered them from the flames. That my friends is the kind of faith that moves mountains, and perhaps the kind of faith we need right here at Bedford Presbyterian Church.